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## STORIES



### The ILLUSION SEEKERS

By P. F. Costello



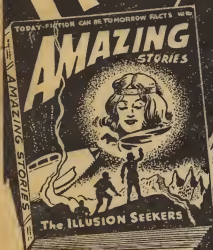
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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating  
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The

# OBSERVATORY

..... by the Editor

**W**ANT TO get in on some astounding news? How would you like to hear something so startling and amazing that you'll react with thrilling wonder, no matter what planet you're from?

**A**LL RIGHT. Fill your glass, light your cigarette, draw up a chair and get comfortable. Better turn off that radio; this is no time for "Young Doctor Malone." Pulse and respiration okay? ... Good. As long as we're going to stun you, you may as well be in position to cushion the shock.

**R**EADY? Then here it is: *AMAZING STORIES* is going slick! Quality! Class! Modern design! Illustrations by top artists—and in color! Large (8 1/2 x 11 1/4) size! An increased number of words per issue!

**D**ID YOU say: what about the stories? We're coming to that. We intend to give you fiction by such craftsmen as Robert A. Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Raymond F. Jones, Kris Neville, A. E. van Vogt, William Temple, Theodore Sturgeon, L. Ron Hubbard, Fredric Brown, and many others of equal caliber. Does that answer your question?

**S**IT STILL; there's more to this than what we've told you thus far. You'll want some fact material too: articles on timely subjects, written by qualified scientists and expert observers. Men like Willie Lee, Fletcher Pratt, L. Sprague DeCamp, and Thomas W. Gardner. William Lindsay Gresham, who wrote the best-selling novel, "Nightmare Alley", will appear in the first issue of the new *AMAZING*, as will many of the others already listed.

**I**N ADDITION to stories and articles, many special features are in the process of being written. Cartoons will be scattered throughout the pages, the "Club House" will be enlarged, an expanded and more representative "Readers' Page" is to be included, and there will be a section devoted to comprehensive reviews of books in the science-fiction field.

**A**WORD about the covers to appear on the new *AMAZING*. They are to be

"quieter" in subject and treatment, without sacrificing any of the sparkle and eye-appeal so characteristic of the present publication. Even the design of the magazine's cover title is to be altered to conform with the new policy.

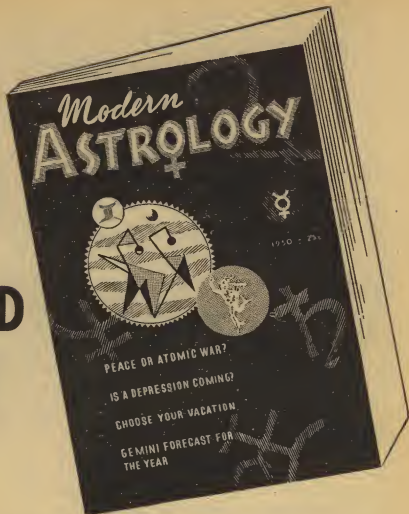
**D**OES THIS mean, you may ask, that the new *AMAZING* is to evolve into a "high-brow" magazine—a publication you'll need a couple of college degrees to understand and enjoy? Absolutely NOT! Stories will continue to be of people and the problems of people. Emphasis will continue to be on action, dialogue, characterization and human emotions. The writing will be smoother than before; the plots will be fresher and, naturally, much more rewarding to read; in short, both the overall design and the contents will be precisely what science-fiction readers have been demanding (and not getting!) for lo! these many years.

**O**F COURSE all this is going to cost this company a great deal of money. Stories and articles by the authors we've listed do not come for peanuts. These men are accustomed to caviar and pheasant under glass—and we must keep their larder stocked if we're to have the best of their work. Increased costs mean a necessarily larger audience, and it's up to fandom to support this new *AMAZING* to the hilt. We think fandom will do just that; certainly it has told us so many, many times. Now the chips are down, your editor's neck is stuck out until his spine creaks, and the suspense continues to mount. On the day the first issue reaches the newsstand, the real test begins—and the final decision will be up to the fans. Are you with us?

**A**POINT we want to make right here, is this: the new *AMAZING* won't be aimed solely at science-fiction readers alone. It will be for anyone and everyone who likes good, fast-paced stories of action and adventure. The articles will be on subjects to interest people who've never heard of science-fiction. Once those readers become exposed to such fiction, once they learn how satisfying and thrilling the best of the genre can be then we're completely satisfied they, too, will become avid fans. Please tell us we're not wrong!

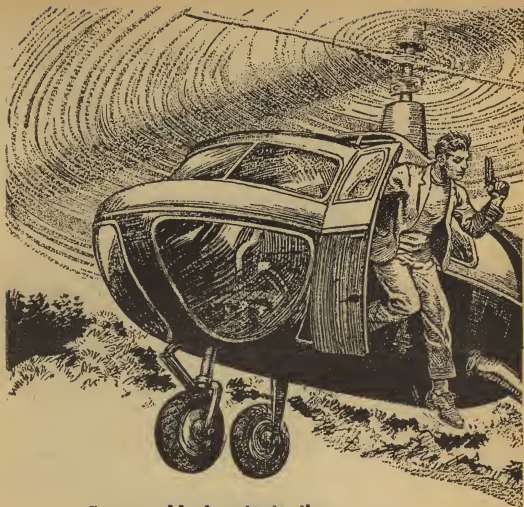
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AHEAD  
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**In a world of mutants, the  
normal person is an alien — and  
Death his constant companion!**

**“R**UN ON HOME and leave us alone—you freak!”

The speaker was a fourteen-year-old boy. He wore loose homespun clothing that was no more than a sack draped on his body. There was a woody growth covering one side of his face.

A ten-year-old girl with a diminutive third arm dangling from her right

shoulder picked up a rock and threw it, barely missing the tall, well-proportioned, sixteen-year-old boy who stood apart, tense, ready to run.

“I’m not a freak,” he said. “And anyway that’s no way to talk. We’re all human beings. That’s what my mother says.”

“Then run on home to your mother,” a sixteen-year-old boy with the

# The ILLUSION SEEKERS

*By P. F. Costello*



Mitch cowered behind David, exclaiming, "But he can't be up there! We killed him!"

backs of his hands studded with finger-like growths taunted. "We don't like you."

"Oh, let him play with us," an eight-year-old said.

"No!" the girl who had thrown the rock said, turning angrily on the speaker, her diminutive third arm jerking limply.

"Throw rocks at him!" another shouted, suiting action to words.

Randy Peters retreated under the barrage of stones, then turned and ran. There were tears of anger in his eyes. Anger and resentment.

It had always been this way. He had no woody growths, no extra arms or legs, no extra fingers or toes. He had nothing except a normal body yet the others called him a freak.

He ran until his tormentors were out of sight, then slowed to a walk. There was little underbrush. His bare feet padded noiselessly on the carpet of pine needles under the trees.

He passed within sight of a structure of sod and logs where people were moving about. Eventually he came to the road.

Randy Peters parted the sarvis berry bushes warily, watching the approach of the stranger along the road from the east. His eyes were very wide. No one had come from out of the east in his memory. And he had never seen a man such as the one who was coming in all his sixteen years of existence. Taller than his own father, beardless, his clothes shaped themselves to him rather than hanging like sackcloth. The man advanced, whistling a strange tune that was itself miraculous in its beauty.

He held his breath as the stranger came close, about to pass him unnoticed. But suddenly his heart stopped too. The man was not passing. Instead he was looking at him, a smile spreading over his face.

"Hello, there," he said cheerfully.

"Why do you hide from me?"

"I wasn't hiding," Randy said, straightening up. "I was just watching you. I've never seen anyone from out of the east before."

"From out of the east?" the stranger echoed, his eyes going down the lane of half-over-grown concrete highway he had already traversed in his journey, then returning to study the boy with grave friendliness. "What's your name, boy?"

"Randy Peters," Randy answered. His eyes frankly surveying the stranger, and seeming to come to a surprising thought from his survey. "That's funny!" he added abruptly. "You are like me!"

"But that's as it should be," the stranger said. "Or are there so few like you in this country?"

"My mother and father aren't like me," Randy said. "What's your name?"

"You may call me Raymond, the Illusion Seeker," the stranger said gravely. "I would like to meet your mother and father, Randy, if you will take me to them."

"They are afraid of strangers," Randy said, shaking his youthful head. "I'm not afraid, but my father would whip me. What is an illusion seeker?"

"Someday when you are full grown I'll tell you—if you find me," Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, said. "If you were to go home slowly so that I couldn't help seeing where you were going, your parents couldn't blame you for my coming."

Randy's smile was quick. "I'm not afraid of being whipped," he said. "And if they learned I had refused to bring you with me they would whip me anyway."

He stepped out of the sarvis berry bushes and stood beside Raymond. tall, rather thin, but straight and well formed, his thick blond hair a mane that dropped to his shoulders, having

never been cut.

"In what way are your mother and father different from you and me?" Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, asked as they walked leisurely along.

"You will see," Randy said calmly. After a long silence he elaborated a little. "My father has many little thumbs growing out at the end of each big thumb. They are well formed and very beautiful. He has many little fingers growing from the backs of his hands. They are ugly and he pulls them off sometimes, but they grow back again. And the skin over one shoulder and part of his neck and face is thick and hard like wood. Brown wood."

"And your mother?" Raymond asked, smiling as if what he had heard was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Her head is soft," Randy said. "She must sleep sitting up, and sometimes she is crazy. Then my father squeezes her head a little with his fingers and she goes to sleep. When she wakes up she has a nosebleed." After a while he added, "Her bones are soft, too. But she can walk."

He turned off the road from the east and started through the woods, the tall pines sighing in the gentle wind. Neither he nor Raymond spoke again. Soon they came to the log and sod structure Randy had always known as his home.

**R**ANDY ran forward, knowing that his mother and father would be lurking in the gloom of the entrance behind the cloth curtain. They did that even when neighbors first approached.

Behind him Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, studied the construction of the hovel with keen interest. The walls had been formed by piling up rectangular hunks of weed sod a foot wide, until a height of nearly seven feet was attained. Then felled pine and tama-

rack logs of medium diameter had been placed close together for the roof, and wet clay had been packed over this, high in the center so that there would be natural drainage. It was a structure that could well last a lifetime without damage.

But now Randy's parents were coming hesitantly into the open, led by their son who dragged each by a hand. The elder Peters was broadshouldered with a thick straw colored head of hair that covered his shoulders, and a heavy beard that grew profusely except where the woody growth of skin covered part of the right half of the face. This was partially concealed by what was obviously a clumsy attempt at deliberate coverage by pulling a few locks of hair over it. His left arm was behind his back. His right hand, held by Randy, was as the boy had described it.

The thumb with its many miniature pink, beautifully formed thumbs, did indeed have a strange beauty to it.

Randy's mother had a certain beauty of features enhanced by a soul deep expression of shyness that centered around her large, intensely blue eyes. Her head above the eyes was round in a queer way. Her legs were bowed outward and seemed to bow even more with each protesting step.

"Hello," Raymond said, not appearing to notice anything unusual.

"Hello," the man and woman answered, embarrassed.

"You're a stranger," Randy's mother said brightly.

"Hush, Mary," the elder Peters said softly. Then to Raymond, "Don't mind her, stranger. Sometimes she's not right in her mind."

"But, but—" Mary protested.

"You're quite right, Mary," Raymond said, ignoring the elder Peters' remark. "I'm a stranger from the east. My name is Raymond."

"Raymond, the Illusion Seeker,"



Randy spoke up. "And he told me he would let me know the meaning of his name when I grow up."

"That's very nice of him, Randy," Mrs. Peters said with a timid yet dignified defiance directed at her husband.

"You will not be wanting to stay here the night?" the elder Peters asked, his manner suddenly unfriendly.

Raymond hesitated, studying the grotesque, partially bearded face.

"No," he agreed softly. "I must go on. There are others living to the west?"

"There are others," the elder Peters said, his hands gripping Randy's shoulders firmly to keep him silent.

"Then I will go," Raymond said. He looked calmly into the eyes of the man and woman, then, smiling, reached into a pocket of his strange coat and drew out a pinch of fine golden dust.

"A charm to protect Randy from all harm," he said stepping forward.

Randy grinned in delight. The fingers holding the golden dust flicked without warning, the dust flying into his mouth, his eyes, and his nostrils. Randy's cry of instinctive alarm ceased with the surprised realization that the dust was not smarting as other dust.

"What is this?" he heard his father say threateningly as he was shoved backward against his mother.

"Witchcraft," Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, whispered dramatically. "It is a spell." Then in normal tones that somehow seemed to contain an infinite sadness. "In three days death will breathe through the trees, and though it shall touch him lightly, *he* shall live."

But Randy, though able to recall the words later, did not consciously hear them. He was feeling the taste of the golden powder. It was a strange

seasoning taste, slightly similar to that of moldy bread. In his nostrils it smelled dank.

Through a blurred film that covered his eyes he saw Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, take a strange-shaped object from another pocket and hold it extended. From it a white powder sprayed briefly. Then he was leaving, down the path by which he had come.

And Mary, his mother, was trembling against Randy, while low threatening sounds came from his father's throat.

THE ELDER Peters had to squeeze his wife's head a little after Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, had gone. She slept, but her face was flushed, and Randy was forced to stay near her and keep her upright in the sleeping chair that had been hers ever since he could remember.

When she awoke she was troubled and full of worries. The elder Peters threatened to squeeze her head again unless she quieted down, but he did not carry out his threat.

Much of the time during the night she kept Randy with her, hugging him so that the bones in her arms curved, straightening slowly when they were released.

Randy remained passive, knowing that he was his mother's only comfort when she was upset. His thoughts were alive with excited speculation behind his calm exterior.

What was an illusion seeker? The stranger, Raymond, had made a great impression on him. There were many reasons for that. The road from the east had always symbolized Mystery. Within his memory no one had ever come from there.

But there were many stories that added to the mystery. Far to the east it was said were gigantic mountains, each but a single stone, like the scab-rock fields in the south canyon mag-

nified a million or more times. These giant rocks were without vegetation. Not a tree, nor even the sarvis berry bushes could grow there.

But the road to the east, the stories said, continued on through this strange country of rock, even though no man could follow it and live.

Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, had come over it though. So the stories were wrong. A man could live on it. A man such as he would someday be, because he was like Raymond. His bones were straight and strong. His head was hard. He had only five well formed fingers on each hand and five toes on each foot, and nowhere on his body did extra arms or legs grow. Nor was there any of the woody growth on him that afflicted his father and most of the other people he knew.

The words of Raymond came into his thoughts. The stranger from the east had placed a charm over him with dust that did not smart. A charm that would protect him from all harm.

The charm dust had tasted of brown mold, though it had been bright yellow. It was powerful. It had made his vision swim, though it hadn't hurt his eyes. It had had a tangy smell that went clear in.

The test of the charm would come in three days, he had said. In three days death would breathe through the trees and touch him, but not harm him.

Morning came. Randy's mother and father were possessed of a new mood. Usually they were somewhat gay, but now they remained indoors, and when they had to go outside they glanced often and fearfully into the treetops. Sometimes they shivered in what Randy surmised to be fear.

But on the second day after the visit of Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, Randy himself shivered, and knew that it was not from dread, nor anything else within his mind, but from the

touch of something unseen.

And the branches of the pines moved strangely at the passage of some invisible thing. Or so it seemed as the chill invisible breath touched him.

On the third day the sun hid behind a dull gray sky. Randy's mother and father huddled together, shivering uncontrollably. They ate nothing. They drank often. As the shadows of night began to creep from the west Randy rose from a game played with small stones, feeling the presence of something that filled him with a strange feeling. Stranger than anything he had ever experienced before.

He ran inside to be with his parents. They were huddled together in one corner, wrapped in each other's arms. But they were dark. The light of life did not shine from them.

Not until that moment did Randy know the full meaning of the words of Raymond. Death had breathed through the trees. It had touched him only lightly and he had felt its touch. But it had touched his mother and father, taking the light of life.

That night for the first time he was alone.

AT SUNUP he stirred himself from the dirt floor at the feet of his mother where he had lain all night. It had rained during the night, and though it was not raining now, it was certain to begin again before long.

Quickly he dragged his few personal treasures out of the house and stacked them under the split shingle roof of the grain shelter. He forced himself to eat bread.

Then he set about walling up the entrance to what had always been his home. He used the ax. His father's ax. Once he had been permitted to hold it in his hands for a few brief, ecstatic seconds, running his adoring fingers over its smooth, polished steel, while his father had stood ready to

grab it away from him lest he maim himself.

Now there was no one to gainsay him. The ax was his! But it gave him no thrill. He used it to cut rectangular strips of sod for the wall, his thoughts full of memories.

It rained. He worked on, the rain soaking his head, making his homespun clothes cling to him, hindering the freedom of his movements.

By noon it was done. The entrance was sealed, and one with the rest of the walls.

Randy ate again, surveying his own treasures while he ate. Reluctantly he came to the decision that he must leave them behind. The rag doll that had been his only playmate, the pretty stones he had collected, and the dozen other things that had formed the foundation of his dream life.

His common sense was whispering that never again would he be able to look to anyone to take care of him. He knew that none of those neighbors he had seen occasionally would welcome him into their circles. In fact, he didn't want to remain here. Someday he would come back on a pilgrimage to the grave of his parents, his home.

But for now his only desire was to put as much distance as he could between him and all he had known. To travel into the west along the road from the east as Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, had done.

For the first time since the death of his parents he thought of Raymond. And suddenly he knew what he had to do. He had to hurry after him and find him, for he was the only one in the world that was like him physically.

Now there was haste in his movements. He filled four small bags with corn and slung them over his shoulders so that they balanced. Then with the ax in his right hand he went down the path to the road from the east.

A mile along the road was a path

leading up to the place where the nearest neighbors lived. He paused at the foot of that path in indecision. But even if the Illusion Seeker had stayed here he would be gone now.

So Randy hurried on toward the west. And because he turned neither right nor left he reached the western foothills without discovering that he alone of all those who had lived in this valley was still alive.

AT SUNUP Randy continued his journey. The road from the east went straight for the most part, at times cutting through hills, at other times crossing depressions on a hill of its own, so that rather than rising and falling with the terrain it managed to maintain a uniform upward slope.

At one place a flood had washed it completely away years before, so that he had to climb down and up again. A gigantic slab of concrete rose at a steep angle out of the ground fifty yards off the line of what had been the road at this point. He went over and examined it, marveling at it.

But he wasted little time. Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, had four days' start on him, and it would take fast travel to catch up with him.

In the afternoon he sighted a pack of wild dogs. They appeared on a ridge a quarter of a mile away.

He became uneasy. His father had brought home the carcass of a wild dog when he was ten so that he would know what they looked like. While Randy had studied the dead creature with wide eyes the elder Peters had told him that it was the most dreaded of all wild animals, traveling in packs. Treacherous and insanely vicious, it delighted in cutting its victims down with its sharp teeth and torturing them while being careful not to kill them.

Once long ago, he had said, man and the dog were friends, living together; but that suddenly the dogs

had turned against their friends, hating them as much as they had loved them.

And though the dogs shunned the places where men lived, whenever they caught a man away from his refuge they showed him no mercy.

Randy hurried his steps, then slowed to his normal pace. Of what use would it be to hurry? And anyway, Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, had placed a charm on him so that no harm could befall him. The dogs couldn't hurt him because of the charm, and he could hurt them with the ax.

A few moments later the dogs appeared through the trees, approaching the road at an angle, single file, at a leisurely trot.

At this point the road from the east was on a ridge ten to fifteen feet above the woods on either side. The dogs came up on the road fifty yards ahead of Randy and sat down to wait for him. He counted them. There were between fifteen and twenty, of all colors and sizes.

Randy began to have misgivings. The way they waited was too quiet and ominous. But Raymond had said no harm could befall him. Raymond had also said the breath of death would touch him lightly. The one thing had been true so the other must be equally true.

As he came up to the dogs they looked at him with slowly blinking orange eyes, their tongues hanging from the side of their mouths, their teeth long and strong.

He let the handle of the ax slip down in his loose fist as he passed the first two dogs. He sensed their sudden charge and sidestepped so that they leaped past him, silent except for the click of their teeth closing on empty air.

With a quick shrug of his shoulders Randy got rid of the sacks of corn.

The ax came alive in his hands, flashing in arcs about him too fast for the eye to follow.

The dogs closed in and were thrown back, maimed and bleeding. The ax turned red. The smell of blood was sickening.

One of the brutes got through and sliced the calf of Randy's leg, then darted to safety. Now they stopped their attack, staying back, watching him.

Four of them were dead. A fifth, his entrails long in the dust, was crawling toward the embankment.

Randy watched the ring of dogs, his breath coming fast. In his mind were two strong emotions. A fierce, wild delight, and amazement at that delight.

He had never fought anything. He had never killed anything. Yet he was happier in a new strange way than he had ever been in his life.

He wanted to shout but he preferred to match the dogs in their silence. With a tight grin on his lips he stopped darting glances at the dogs behind him and advanced toward those in front of him.

They remained where they were. He watched their eyes, and when those yellow eyes focused on something behind him he turned swiftly, his ax arcing to catch the three who had leaped at him.

He found his eyes and arms acting together, guiding the ax. A part of his mind seemed disengaged from the rest, directing what should be done, planning in advance.

When the dogs drew back again there were seven dead and dying. The others shifted their gaze from Randy to their dead companions, pulling in their tongues and closing their mouths thoughtfully.

Without warning Randy darted forward and killed two outright. They hadn't moved, expecting him to repeat his first maneuver.

With this the others, as at a signal, turned and left. Randy leaned on his ax, watching them go.

Suddenly the gash in his leg was smarting and burning. He grinned fiercely and loaded the bags back on his shoulders. Soon he would come to some stream where he could cool it in the running water and cover it with mud.

In his heart was a fierce exultation. Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, had spoken the truth. No harm could come to him.

IT WAS late afternoon before he came to a stream within sight of the road from the east. In the morning, in spite of the bathing and cooling mud, his leg was too stiff and sore for travel. It was a week before he could do more than hobble. When he did take up his march it was slow and tedious, so that altogether it was ten days before he crossed the mountain into the valley of the lake.

He had known there would be the lake. His father had told him that beyond the western mountains was a valley with a lake.

By now his leg was stiff only in the morning, the stiffness wearing off quickly with exercise.

Loneliness made him hurry. He no longer had hopes of catching up with Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, but the sight of any living person was something to look forward to. And as he studied the beauty of the long rambling lake from the heights of the mountainside he was descending he felt that people would be surely living here.

The road from the east went down and down until the lake was lost to view behind the tall trees. Soon every mile or so there was a worn path leading off from the road.

Finally Randy decided to follow one of these paths and greet whoever

lived at its end.

The path wound through the trees following the curve of the hill. After a mile it opened abruptly on a clearing where there were three sod houses within sight of one another.

No one was in sight. Randy approached slowly into the clearing, his eyes searching for signs of movement in the dark doorways.

"Hallo!" he called cheerfully. But there was no answer.

Hesitantly he went up to the doorway of the nearest house and peered inside. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom he saw why no one had come to greet him. There was a man and a woman. They were huddled on the dirt floor in a far corner. And there were two boys and a girl.

All were dead.

Randy advanced into the long narrow room, his eyes large and round with wonder.

The dead man had a large purple growth covering the left side of his head—a common enough thing, since several of the neighbors in Randy's own community had borne similar growths.

The woman's entire face and forehead was covered with fine hair which she had kept combed away from her eyes. There was a large growth pushing out her right hip under her dress.

The girl's hands ended in many long, reedlike fingers with small delicately wrought nails. Her lips drew back in death, revealing double rows of thin round teeth. Her age had been around ten years.

The two boys seemed to have none of the common varieties of differences. Until Randy noticed the flattening of their heads where they lay against the floor, and knew that they were soft-boned.

Slowly Randy backed out of the hovel. Outside he turned toward the other sod houses. And minutes later

he stood in the center of the clearing with full realization of the horror that had preceded him across the mountain. In each of those sod houses was nothing but death.

Numbed in mind and body, he began the task of walling up the doorways.

**"IF YOU** try to wall up the houses of all the dead you'll be dead yourself before you get done."

The quiet, kindly voice burst into Randy's conscious thought with startling abruptness. In a swift movement he dropped the heavy chunk of sod he was carrying and turned, half crouching.

Five men were standing where they had stepped out of the forest behind him. They wore friendly smiles. Randy relaxed slowly, sensing no danger.

Then the implication of the words sunk in.

"What do you mean?" he asked, frowning. "You sound like there are more dead than these here."

A heavy-bearded man with fingers growing from the backs of his hands like small sausages answered.

"There are two or three thousand dead here in the Cour d'Alene shore country," he said. "We five are all that are left alive."

"And if we had been here when it happened," another, with an enormous head and very narrow shoulders, spoke up, "maybe we'd be dead too."

"Where you from, son?" the first one asked.

"Across the mountain," Randy said, nodding toward the east. "My mother and father died—like this. I left in search of Raymond, the Illusion Seeker."

"Him!" A very short very broad man had spoken, spitting against the trunk of a tree. "Old man Smith was still alive when we got to him. He said

that guy did the killing. With a curse or something."

"Oh, but he didn't!" Randy said quickly. "He said that the breath of death would come in three days, but he gave me a charm to protect me from all harm."

"A charm?" the short man echoed skeptically. "Then why didn't he give you Ma and Pa a charm?"

"I—I don't know," Randy said. "But how could he kill them when he didn't touch them, and they didn't die until three days later?" He stared defiantly.

"A curse," the man said matter-of-factly. "We know such a thing is possible. Where's this charm he gave you?"

"It was some yellow dust," Randy said. "He threw it in my mouth and nose and eyes."

"I've been over east of the mountain," another of the five said. "Your Ma and Pa the only ones that died?"

"Yes," Randy said. "That is, I don't know. I didn't go around and find out. When my mother and father were dead there was nothing to make me. I lit out and came here after Raymond."

"The other kids never liked you, huh," the bearded man said sympathetically. "They resented your not having something wrong with your makeup."

Randy flushed and didn't answer.

"How long ago was this that Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, visited you?" he continued.

"Ten days ago," Randy said.

The five looked at one another and nodded grimly.

"You'd better stick with us—what's your name, son?" the short broad man said.

"Randy," Randy replied. "Randy Peters."

"Stick with us, Randy," the short man went on. "There's no one else

alive for miles around. We've been looking."

"But I want to find Raymond," Randy said frankly.

"So do we," the short man said grimly. "Forget that walling up the doorways. There's too many of them even to start. We're leaving this valley of the dead anyway. Come on."

He gave Randy a gentle, friendly shove with a broad short-fingered hand. They all went toward the path to the road from the east that Randy had left when he entered the woods.

As they walked along they introduced themselves. The heavily bearded man was the leader. His name was Dave. The very short, very wide man was Mitch. The bulbous-headed man was Fred. The other two, so much alike they were probably twins, were Frank and Jack.

They walked with the swift easy gait of experienced walkers, following the road from the east as it went north along the lake, which Randy now learned was called the Cour d'Alene.

These men, Randy soon discovered, knew far more than his father had ever taught him. They called the country where he had been born the Panhandle, and said the Panhandle and the Cour d'Alene were all a part of the Idaho country.

They were heading toward the Spokane country, and beyond the Spokane country was nothing but desert.

They said that Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, had no more than two day's start on them, and would probably still be in the Spokane country when they reached it.

They all swung their axes suggestively when they talked of Raymond, but they said nothing more against him.

WITH THE northern tip of Lake Cour d'Alene in sight the road

from the east dipped down abruptly and emerged onto a vista that brought a gasp of amazement to Randy's lips.

As far as he could see were ruins of strange houses of rotting wood and stone of various kinds, some of them like the stone of the road from the east.

Dave and Mitch were in the lead ahead of Randy. They had taken no more than half a dozen steps away from the edge of the woods when they stopped abruptly and turned.

"Back and find a tree," they said urgently. "Dogs!"

Randy stared around him, still bewildered by the sight of the ruins of Cour d'Alene City. The five men were already climbing the nearest trees, leaving their axes on the ground.

Now Randy caught sight of the dogs. They were coming toward him in an easy lope, their long red tongues hanging out. In the lead was a large, huge shouldered brute. Randy estimated their number at ten or eleven.

A thrill of anticipation shot through him. Here was a chance to prove to these men that Raymond had really given him a charm against all harm.

As silent as the approaching dogs, he went forward to meet them, his ax ready.

"Hey, you crazy kid!" Mitch's voice sounded behind him. Randy flicked his tongue along his grinning lips, not bothering to reply.

The lead dog hastened his pace. The others dropped behind, puzzled by this foolhardy human.

Utterly sure of himself, the lead dog suddenly spurted, leaping with open jaws toward Randy's throat. Randy sidestepped swiftly, turning with the passing of the brute and neatly severing the spine in the neck with his ax. In a continuation of the movement he pivoted clear around to meet the other dogs.

They stopped abruptly, then slowly



formed a circle around him, ten feet away from him. Two of the dogs went up and sniffed of their dead leader, licking their chops nervously.

Now there was not a sound. The men in the trees, realizing their cries were of no use, and seeing what Randy had already done to the largest of the dogs, were remaining quiet, watching.

Randy repeated his first maneuver used on the other dog pack, darting toward one point on the circle and turning at the right instant to catch those that had charged from behind. But now he had no time to plan. The dogs were charging in.

With all his senses keyed at high pitch he was dodging and swinging his ax, making every blow count.

In the last tenth of a second of the battle the sole surviving dog made a desperate attempt to escape. Randy ran after him, bringing him down on the run.

Panting from the exertion he stooped down and cleaned his ax in the dirt. From the corner of his eye he watched the five men descend slowly from their perches in the branches of the pine trees.

They came toward him, finally stopping near him, their eyes on him.

"I told you Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, had given me a charm to protect me from all harm," Randy said with quiet gravity!

"Would you kill a *man* with that ax?" Fred, the one with the bulbous head, asked, his voice tight.

"Shut up, Fred," Dave said harshly.

"Well he did that like he took pleasure in it!" Fred shouted thinly.

"I wish I could do it," Mitch said admiringly. "Many's the time I've spent a day or two up a tree because of the dogs."

"And we would've this time except for Randy," Dave said. "Of course he wouldn't kill a man."

"Of course not," Randy said. He stood up, swinging his ax as though it were part of his arm. "Dogs are enemies. They never make peace. My father taught me that."

Fred watched the blade of Randy's ax as it flashed in the sunlight. He started to shiver.

"I'm cold," he said, his teeth chattering.

"Let's move on," Dave said gruffly.

**I**N AN HOUR they left the crumbling monuments to the unknown past that was the city of Cour d'Alene behind. Fred, his bulbous head often wobbling precariously above his narrow shoulders, his teeth chattering, cast a depressing spell over everything.

"It's the curse," he kept mumbling.

"The breath of death," Randy said. "Not a curse. Raymond is good. Why should he put a curse on anyone?"

"Why should he give you a charm against all harm?" Fred chattered angrily. "Is it a coincidence that you are the only one this side of the mountains or the other that's not adorned with some deformity?"

There was a long silence, interrupted only by the sounds of their bare feet padding on the pavement of the road from the east, and Fred's chattering teeth.

"They aren't deformities," Randy said quietly ten minutes later. "My father said that whatever God gives is not a deformity, but is given us to carry out His plans."

Frank and Jack, the brothers, gave a derisive, "Oh yeah?" But Dave shook his head at them warningly.

"Your father was probably right, Randy," he said. "We are too stupid to understand. We don't know why we're here, nor where we're going when we leave here. It may be that what we think of as deformities are really very important things in His plans. But that's all the more reason why Raymond, the Illusion Seeker,

should not place a curse on us all."

"But he didn't—" Randy bit his lip and gave up. In his own mind doubt was beginning to grow. He refused to recognize it. But that doubt increased his desire to find Raymond. Raymond would tell him the truth. Raymond would tell these men how wrong they were. If they *were* wrong. But they *must* be wrong! It would be too monstrous a thing: Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, placing a curse on all these hundreds of people so they would die. It would be murder!

The others, watching him as they walked along, saw the reflection of his thoughts on his face. Then they would look at one another knowingly, glance at Randy's swinging ax, and nod in silent hope.

If they could convince Randy of the truth of what they believed, they could get him to kill Raymond.

They made camp at sundown. During the night Fred died, his teeth chattering to the end, his eyes sinking deeply under his bulging brow.

In the morning Frank and Jack were shivering, their faces ashen from the realization that they were about to die.

Dave and Mitch walked away from camp and talked together in low voices, their eyes turning to Frank and Jack while they talked. Then they came back into camp.

"We're leaving you here," Dave said abruptly to them. "Mitch, Randy and I are pushing on." When Frank and Jack started to object he cut them short. "We should have left Fred," he said curtly. "If we had, maybe the curse wouldn't have spread to you two. Anyway, it's better for you to wait here for death. One place is as good to die as another." He looked significantly at Mitch and Randy and said, "Let's go."

"You two can go," Randy said. "I'm staying. One place may be as good as

another to die, but if some dogs came this way Frank and Jack couldn't get away from them."

"Thanks, Randy," Frank chattered, overcome by a chill.

Dave rubbed the mass of fingers on the back of his right hand against his clothes in a gesture of irritation and anger.

"You aren't being sensible, Randy," he said. "They'll be dead by tomorrow." His eyes avoided Frank and Jack as he said this.

"That's all right," Randy said. "I'm staying. You can do what you want to."

He swung his ax casually, sensing that all four of them were afraid of him—afraid to push their will on him too strongly. Although he didn't realize it the death of his parents and his success in two fights against packs of wild dogs had transformed his entire character. More than that, was his conviction that Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, had made him safe from all harm.

Dave and Mitch studied each other uncomfortably.

"We'll stay," Dave said abruptly.

**THE DAY** wore along slowly. Randy sought the shade of the trees and lay down. His thoughts drifted. He thought longingly of his mother, fiercely protective, always bearing her suffering cheerfully. In his heart he felt that her too-round cranium and her grotesquely bowed legs were the most beautiful in all creation. Certainly her mother love for him had been the most beautiful thing in his life, just as his father's firm hand and solid body had been a bulwark of strength to him.

Dave, in many ways, was like his father had been. His hands were the same except that he didn't have the beautiful fanned out miniature thumbs that had been his father's pride. Basically Dave was like his father in

temperament, though. And Randy did not find his new strength within himself sufficient.

He opened his eyes and raised his head, looking around for Dave. He found him sitting with his back to a tree not far away. Randy rose and walked casually over to where Dave sat, and squatted down. Dave opened his eyes and looked at him without expression.

"You're a lot like my father was," Randy said, pulling loose a grass stem and chewing on it.

Dave blinked thoughtfully over this from underneath his shaggy eyebrows. A heavy hand, its back studded with many small fingers that seemed somehow not out of place, came up and stroked his beard that lay like a mat on his chest.

"I may have known your father. Randy," he said after a while. "That would have been before you were born. At least I knew a fellow the other side of the mountain then. Can't remember his name. Had fan thumbs and a broad band of brown thick skin from his face down over his neck onto his shoulder."

Randy nodded solemnly. "You knew him."

"Mighty nice girl he married," Dave said. "Soft boned and a little crazy at times, but any man would have been lucky to get her."

"That was my mother," Randy said, his voice strong with pride.

Dave nodded gravely.

"I know now where you get your fine qualities," he said. "Should have guessed." He was silent a long time. "My own woman and two girls were dead when I found them," he said abruptly. His eyes hardened. "The curse Raymond called the breath of death." He nodded toward Frank and Jack. "What ails them."

He got to his feet and strode away. Randy watched him walk away, a soft

light in his eyes. For the first time since the coming of Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, he was happy.

At sundown Frank died. Jack went to pieces after that, screaming against the Illusion Seeker, cursing him, crying at the injustice of things that he should have to die like this.

Randy, standing apart, his eyes on the red skyline to the west, trying to blot out the sound of Jack's suffering, felt a heavy hand laid gently on his shoulder. He looked around quickly and saw Dave's bearded face.

"He shouldn't last much longer," Dave said. "Mitch and I think we ought to push on tonight. We've been resting all day."

"Yes," Randy said, his voice tight. "We've got to push on and find Raymond so you can find out this isn't his fault."

"And if he admits it is?" Dave asked.

Randy shook his head slowly and firmly. Dave opened his mouth, then closed it and turned away.

THE SKY was clear and blue except for an occasional misty cloud. The moon was a bloated crescent with three scintillating points of light in the darkened area, poised like stars between the horns of the crescent. In the bright crescent itself were a half dozen points of sunlike brilliance. But these had always been a part of the moon so far as Randy, Dave, and Mitch knew, and they paid no special attention to them.

The road from the east went north a few miles, then turned and went straight west in a direct line. Trees were scattered sparsely. Now and then the silence was broken by the distant howl of a wild dog. More often twin dots of light flashed briefly ahead or to one side, indicating the presence of a cat.

Once a throaty roar sounded from

overhead, seeming to originate from the south, and sweeping across the sky to the north in the space of three deep breaths. The three travelers discussed this mysterious sound. They had never heard anything like it before.

"There must be lots of things we don't know about in the world," Mitch said philosophically.

"It sounded something like a voice," Randy said. "It makes me think of the breath of death when it visited me and touched me lightly. I saw the branches of the trees move like some spirit was passing through the trees. Then I felt a chill touch that seemed to go right through me and out again. If it had happened before Raymond gave me the charm against all harm I would have been afraid."

"Did it make a sound?" Dave asked, interested.

"I don't think so," Randy said. "I don't remember hearing one. In fact, there may have been no connection. I just thought I saw the branches move. It could have been just the wind."

The road from the east began to have other roads leading off from it. At one place there were five branch roads, some of them in better condition. In every case where there was a choice Dave insisted they take the branch going west.

The sky at their backs was beginning to assume the gray light of dawn when they came to a large field smelling of recent grassfire, and charred so that it appeared black over a considerable distance.

Across this blackened field could be seen the vague outlines of something that gleamed metallically in the morning light. Voices drifted to them.

"Come on," Randy said eagerly. "Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, may be here."

He started into the field toward the strange object, Dave and Mitch fol-

lowing more slowly.

Suddenly there was a coughing roar that settled into a deep, throaty blast of deafening proportions. The shape of metal seemed to grow larger.

Dave and Mitch turned and ran. Randy stood his ground, erect, defiant, his ax held ready. The thing rushed toward him, details of shape emerging as it neared.

It rose upward as if to leap on him at the last moment. He had a brief impression of something long and tapering, with a needle-like nose and four streams of white interlaced with fire rushing out behind it. Then it had passed overhead and was gone.

As he turned to watch its departure he heard the same throaty, muted roar he and his companions had heard earlier, fading to nothing in a brief minute.

Now Dave and Mitch came back, shamefaced but full of excitement.

"What was it?" Mitch asked.

"It was man-made," Randy said positively. "Maybe there were men in it. I seemed to sense eyes on me as it passed over."

"Maybe Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, was in it," Dave said, adding a curse under his breath.

"Let's go look where it was," Mitch suggested more practically. "There may be signs we can read to find out what it was."

They went across the field toward the moon, which was low on the horizon, its light changed to a pale white by the rising sun in the east, its several pinpoints of brightness standing out so that they seemed like separate stars superimposed on the moon.

THERE WERE broad shallow ruts in the soft earth. Three of them, spaced about six feet apart. They began abruptly where the strange thing had taken into the air, and led to where it had been standing when they

first had seen it.

Randy, Dave, and Mitch carefully studied the ground, finding the indentations of feet, the tracks strangely shaped as though whoever had made them had had on some sort of foot covering with stiff, trim-edged soles.

"That's the Illusion Seeker!" Randy exclaimed. "He wore things that made tracks like this and made sharp sounds on the road from the east when he walked."

"Here's some that lead away," Mitch said. "Maybe he didn't leave in that thing. Let's follow these tracks and see."

The three of them walked swiftly, their eyes following the tracks.

"He was running along here," Dave mumbled.

They hastened their steps. Dave and Mitch took firmer grips on their axes, their lips compressing. Occasionally their eyes lifted to look ahead, in the hopes they would see Raymond.

Suddenly Mitch touched Dave's and Randy's arms and came to a stop, pointing ahead. A quarter of a mile away was a lone figure, walking swiftly.

"We can cut over to the left in those trees and get ahead of him," he said. "Randy, you wait until we have time to get ahead, then call to him and walk up to him openly. That way he'll think you're alone. If he starts anything we can rush him from behind."

He winked at Dave so that Randy couldn't see it. Randy smiled to himself, coming to the silent conclusion that Mitch and Dave were afraid, and wanted to use him to see if there was danger, while they remained hidden and ready to run.

"All right," he said. "The trees come close to where he's heading. I'll stop him there. You get close enough so you can hear and I'll ask him if he killed everybody. Then you'll see that he didn't."

He watched Dave and Mitch disappear into the trees at a swift trot, shifted the sacks of corn on his shoulders, and started up again, his eyes on the lone figure ahead.

He had cut the distance separating him from that figure to a hundred yards when the man ahead turned to look back and saw him.

"Hallo!" Randy called cheerfully. "Are you Raymond?"

"Yes," the man called, stopping.

Randy hurried up.

"Do you remember me?" he asked.

There was a doubtful scowl on Raymond's face. Then his eyes lit in recognition.

"Of course!" he said. "You're Randy."

"When my mother and father died I followed you," Randy said. "I thought I'd never find you."

Raymond, the doubtful scowl returning, walked along beside Randy. Randy managed to direct their steps toward the edge of the woods without seeming to do so, keeping up the conversation by telling Raymond of his encounter with the dogs.

At the edge of the woods he managed to get Raymond's back to a clump of bushes. He slid his bags of corn off his shoulders and sat down on the damp grass with a tired sigh.

"I've been traveling all night," he said.

Raymond squatted on his heels. When he wasn't looking, Randy peered through the underbrush, still keeping up his talking while Raymond listened to him sympathetically.

Finally Randy saw furtive movement through the brush. It came closer until Dave and Mitch were just a few feet behind Raymond.

"Tell me Raymond, the Illusion Seeker," Randy asked slowly, "I know you gave me a charm against the breath of death and all harm. Did you bring the breath of death that killed

my mother and father—and all the others?”

He studied Raymond's hiking boots, waiting for the answer he was confident he would hear. It didn't come.

Instead, there was a rustle of movement from the underbrush, a flash of metal. Randy looked up to see Mitch standing over Raymond, his ax buried deeply in Raymond's shoulder, having narrowly missed his head.

Raymond's hand was hovering over the spot where the ax was buried. There was an unbelieving, horrified expression on his clean-shaven face. His mouth was open in a soundless cry.

**I**N A swift movement Randy was on his feet, his own ax raised. As Mitch pulled his ax loose and raised it to strike a second blow he stepped protectively over Raymond.

“Stop, Mitch!” he said softly. “I'll kill you if you don't.”

Mitch dropped his blood-smeared ax to the ground and retreated slowly.

“No. No, Randy,” he said. “He did it. You heard. He didn't answer. He couldn't, because he killed them all, just like Dave and I said.”

There was a deep groan from Raymond. Randy dropped his ax and bent down.

“What should we do?” he asked anxiously.

“Nothing,” Raymond gasped. His lips drew back in a grin. “Your friend Mitch—got me. Good. But he's wrong. I didn't kill those people. It was virus plague.”

The blood was seeping out of the deep gash in his shoulder rapidly, soaking his coat and his arm.

Dave stepped boldly out of the woods and faced Raymond.

“If you didn't kill them,” he said accusingly, “how were you able to save Randy with your charm, and not use it on the others?”

“There's not enough of it,” Raymond said. “I was saving it for any others I could find like Randy, that didn't have any deformities.”

“You're dying,” Mitch said. “Use some of it on me so I won't die.”

Raymond lifted his head and looked at Mitch. Mitch's eyes turned away.

“Look, Randy,” Raymond said. “I haven't much time left. I'm already faint from loss of blood. In one of my pockets you'll find the yellow powder that I used on you. It's yours. In exchange you must promise me that you'll go back on the road to the east and keep going until you reach my people. It will be a long march. Winter will come. Then you must wait until spring, wherever you are, and go on again. There are papers inside my coat. Take them with you and give them to whoever you meet. When you give them to someone who knows what they are, do whatever he tells you. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Randy said. “Should I kill Mitch?”

Raymond was beyond answering. His head dropped, his chin resting on his chest. His hand fell away from the half severed shoulder.

Randy looked at the brightly glistening blood and rose to his feet.

“Dead,” he whispered.

“The yellow powder,” Mitch said. “Get it and use it like he did on you.”

Randy stared into Raymond's dead face, seeming not to hear Mitch. Mitch impatiently tried to push him out of the way and get to the yellow powder himself. Dave seized him roughly by the mat of hair on his head and pulled him back.

“Use some sense,” he said warningly, “or you'll wind up with an ax buried in your shoulder.”

“What do you mean?” Mitch said angrily. “It was as much your idea as mine!”

“Shut up!” Dave warned.

The glaze in Randy's eyes vanished suddenly. Sentient intelligence flowed into his right arm, and down into the ax it held. He rose to a half crouch and turned. Mitch's bloodstained ax was still on the ground. Dave's was in his hand.

"Drop your ax, Dave," Randy said, his voice low and toneless. When Dave hesitated, "Drop it—or start using it to defend yourself."

Dave licked his lips nervously, then let his ax slip from his fingers to the ground.

"Step back," Randy said.

Dave and Mitch backed up. Randy scooped up both axes.

"What are you going to do?" Mitch asked, hysteria in his voice.

"I don't know yet," Randy said. He looked at the blood on Mitch's ax and repeated it thoughtfully. "I don't know yet."

And Dave and Mitch stared at him anxiously, knowing from the swiftness and sureness Randy had exhibited in his fight with the dog pack that they were completely at his mercy.

**R**ANDY ordered them back further, and made them lie down. Then he laid the three axes where he could get them at an instant's notice, and with one eye on Dave and Mitch began searching Raymond's coat pockets. There were four pockets outside and one on either side inside the coat. Each contained something.

He look at his own pocketless, shapeless covering. Compressing his lips he lifted Raymond up and took the coat off. He put it on swiftly before Dave and Mitch could have a chance to attack, if they had had any desire to do so.

It was a loose fit, but the sleeves were not too long. The blood on the left shoulder was still sticky. It could be washed out at the next stream.

In one of the inside pockets Randy

found the papers. He nodded in satisfaction. They were written so that he could make out the words by long and tedious study in his leisure time during the long trip over the road to the east. Writing and reading were things his father had taught him. It was tradition. His father's father had taught him, and made him promise to teach his son, and his own father had made him solemnly swear that if and when he had a son he would teach him and make him also swear to carry it on. But this was the first time Randy had seen real paper. The writing itself was very small, the characters no more than a fraction of an inch high, and very neat. His own writing had been on the surface of flattened out sand gathered from sand pockets in the bed of the creek, and had been necessarily very large.

Randy risked no more attention on the contents of the pockets, except to reach into the pocket where he remembered the yellow dust was and make sure there was still some there. Two of the pockets contained heavy objects, wide, thick, and long, like small boxes. They could be examined later.

He returned his attention to Raymond, looking enviously at the shirt and trousers he wore. The trousers also had pockets. He dropped to his knees and searched, finding a long narrow object of metal.

He studied it intently and quickly discovered small slots in the metal strips. He caught one with his fingernails and pulled, bringing out a sharp blade. He had never heard of a pocket knife. He was delighted with it, sensing its possibilities immediately.

There was nothing else.

He stood up, finished with Raymond. His eyes turned to Dave and Mitch where they lay obediently on the ground. In the back of his mind he had been studying what to do about



them. Now he voiced his decision.

"Stand up," he ordered. They obeyed. He looked at their mute faces, his eyes softening. "I've been thinking what to do," he said. "Maybe I should kill both of you, or at least you, Mitch. But I can see no object in it. There's been too many deaths already as it is, and we three are all that are left alive. But I'm not giving you the charm to protect you from all harm."

Dave and Mitch nodded with eager gratefulness. They would take their chances with virus plague. They had escaped certain death from an ax by Randy's decision, and they were well aware of it.

"You can go your way," Randy added, "or come with me on the road to the east as Raymond commanded."

"We'll go with you," they both said quickly.

"I'll carry the axes," Randy said, assuming his new role of leader unconsciously. "Mitch, you will carry the sacks of corn."

He picked up the three axes and started back toward the road from the east. Two of the axes he carried balanced in his left hand. His own he carried easily in his right, ready for use as a weapon.

He did not look back, knowing that Dave and Mitch would certainly follow.

**D**AYS STRETCHED into weeks, and weeks into months. Randy, Dave, and Mitch became three automations that lay down at night, only to rise at sunup and continue on along the road to the east as it crossed the northern panhandle of Idaho into Montana where it became chunks of concrete widely distributed—mere landmarks rather than a road.

There was no vegetation. There were towering mountains of bare stone. There were great fields of huge boulders. There were stretches of sand.

There were even rivers winding among the boulders, often disappearing below ground. But there was never a single green thing to indicate life.

This didn't bother them. They had no information from the past. They had no way of knowing that Montana had once been a rolling country rich in vegetation.

One day the first snow fell. It was on that same day that Randy became seventeen years of age.

He held his face up, letting the cool flakes caress his beardless cheeks. He thought of other birthdays. Days when his mother had excitedly shook him awake and informed him that another year had been added to his age.

In the long, monotonous trek memory of his parents had receded, but now it returned with new life. In order to hide it from Dave and Mitch he kept well ahead of them.

They, bowed under their heavy loads of corn and other foodstuffs which he had made them bring for the journey through the rock mountains, welcomed this chance to talk—the first they had had in a long time, so closely did Randy keep to them.

"Wonder what's got into Randy today," Mitch mumbled furtively. "Ever since the snow started to fall he's had a dreamy look on his face. Now he walks ahead just like we weren't along."

"What difference does it make?" Dave gumbled. "It gives us a chance to talk. It's about time we did something about this situation."

"I know," Mitch said, "but what? Both of us together are no match for him. He sleeps so lightly that if we even thought of him while he's asleep it would wake him up with his hand on his ax—and ours at his side."

"We could turn back," Dave said. "I don't think he'd stop us."

"And lose out on the charm?" Mitch asked.

"He's in a good mood," Dave said. "Let's catch up with him and ask him to give it to us now. Maybe he will."

"First, let's talk a little," Mitch said. "We may not get the chance again for a while. I'm in favor of asking him for the charm, and if he doesn't give it to us, waiting our chance to kill him. If we agree on that there won't be any need of talking when the chance comes."

"How would we do it?" Dave asked, looking nervously ahead at Randy's back, a hundred yards ahead.

"Lots of ways," Mitch said. "I had a chance to trip him day before yesterday. If I could have been sure you were with me I'd have done it. The best way would be to wait until he's asleep. He'd wake up, but not before we landed on him and took his axes away. Without the axes we could get the better of him. We're stronger."

"Hitting him on the head with a good-sized rock while he's asleep would be better," Dave said. "Unless his charm is really against all harm. Then nothing we could do would be any good."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Mitch confessed. "But we've got to do something. I can't see being stuck here in the middle of nothing all winter."

"We're agreed then," Dave said. "Now let's catch up and ask him. If he gives us the charm we stand an even chance. If the charm works we can't harm him and he can't harm us. Then we can do what we like."

They hastened their pace and soon caught up with Randy. Dave called to him to wait. When he stopped they went up to him and dropped their heavy sacks and sat on them to rest.

"Randy," Dave said after a moment. "How about giving us the charm now. We're the only three people alive, and if the virus plague caught up with us and killed us, you'd be all alone. Not only that, we

don't know what we're going to meet when we get to the end of the road from the east. If there's danger, we should have the protection against all harm too."

"Yes," Randy said. "There's truth in what you say. It would be terrible to be alone in the world. I think everyone but us must be dead." He reached into the pocket containing the yellow powder and brought out a pinch of it. "Open your mouth and don't duck," he commanded Dave.

When Dave complied, Randy flicked the yellow powder into his face as Raymond had done it to him. He drew out another pinch of the powder and flicked it into Mitch's face.

"There," he said. "I don't know how long it takes, but in three days it will certainly reach its full potency. Three days after it was given to me I felt the breath of death without it harming me."

Dave and Mitch blinked their eyes and shot each other a secret, triumphant glance.

"Three days," Mitch said, his tone carrying a secret decision to Dave.

THE SNOW increased. At dusk they found an overhang where they could sleep in comfort. Randy, having now given Dave and Mitch the charm, seemed no longer cautious. While he slept Mitch cautiously picked up one of the axes and felt of its sharp edge. But Dave shook his head and formed a silent "No" with his lips, and Mitch put it back.

They slept, and during the night the wind increased. All the next day they forged on through the driving snowstorm. That evening they found a large cave.

"We'll wait out the winter here," Randy decided. "The snow will provide plenty of water. We can keep the entrance to the cave covered with a sack, and our body heat will keep it

warm inside."

"Perfect," Mitch agreed, giving Dave a significant glance.

As Randy emptied one of the sacks of corn against the wall of the cave and studied ways to make it serve as a cover over the entrance Dave and Mitch grinned at each other silently, their manner calm and patiently efficient as that of the wild dogs.

Randy leaned all three axes against the wall of the cave before lying down to sleep. Again Mitch looked at Dave questioningly and received a silent shake of the head. He frowned, hunched his broad shoulders, and settled his short stocky body on the hard floor.

Dave sat down against the wall near the entrance. He didn't close his eyes, but remained restless, shifting often, sighing in exasperation at his sleeplessness.

The cave was in total darkness. Except for their breathing there was no sound.

Suddenly Dave jerked his eyes toward the rear of the cave. There had been no sound. What had startled him?

He frowned, trying to analyze what was in his mind to discover what had attracted his attention in that direction. It came to him what it was.

It was a strange odor. It was very faint, but now that he knew what had attracted him he brought full concentration to bear on it.

It definitely came from the rear of the cave—yet there had been nothing there—could be nothing in this sterile, lifeless land they had penetrated.

There was nothing. Only the deep, regular breathing of his two companions. Or was there other breathing? Dave held his own breath, straining to listen for the faintest sound that was foreign. He swallowed.

The noise in his dry throat was loud.

Then suddenly he saw two eyes far back in the darkness. Panic striking to the core of his being, he leaped up, giving a hoarse shout of fear. His head struck the stone roof of the cave. He reeled, bright lights exploding before him, and stumbled over feet.

"What is it?" Randy said.

"In the back of the cave," Dave said, his voice filled with terror. "Eyes. A strange smell." He lifted himself, resting his weight on the palms of his hands and shaking his head to clear it.

"I don't see any eyes," Randy said. "You must have been dreaming. A nightmare."

"I wasn't asleep," Dave said more calmly. "I smelled something. Maybe an animal, although it seemed a little like a human smell. Then I saw those eyes at the back of the cave. They scared me."

Randy had moved to the cave entrance and jerked away the sack covering. The snowstorm had ended. The sky was clear and the moon, reflected by the new snow, cast enough light into the cave to see things vaguely.

He took one of the axes, glanced doubtfully at the ceiling, laid the ax down and took out the pocket knife, pulling open its longest blade.

He crept toward the back of the cave while Dave and Mitch watched, their eyes round with fear.

"Hah!" Randy exclaimed suddenly. "You may have seen something at that. There's an opening back here leading into another cavern. Just big enough to crawl through. Let's explore."

"Not me!" Mitch said.

"Uh-uh!" Dave said. "Let's get out of here!"

"Why are you afraid?" Randy asked. "You're now protected against all harm just as I am. Come on!"

"You go," Mitch said.

"Well," Randy said, grinning in the dark. "O. K. It's a good idea. Then if whatever is back in here slips past me and tries to escape, you two can capture it."

"I'll go with you," Mitch said quickly.

"Me too," Dave said.

"Bring the axes with you," Randy said.

THEY WRIGGLED through the small opening, Randy going first. Once they were in they crouched, waiting for their eyes to adjust to the deeper gloom. Ahead was deep black mystery of a vague form. They held their breath, staring, listening, and testing the atmosphere with sensitive nostrils.

"I think I get the smell," Randy said in a hoarse whisper. "It smells familiar, too. I don't know what it is, but I've smelled it before."

"—smelled it before," his hoarse whisper echoed hollowly.

"Shhh!" Mitch hissed.

"Shhh!" the echo came back.

But Dave and Randy had heard what Mitch had. The faint sound of a pebble falling in the distance. They listened for several minutes, but the sound wasn't repeated.

"Probably a chip from the roof of the cave," Dave muttered.

"And what you probably saw was some cave creature as afraid of you as you were of it," Randy said in a normal tone. "Let's go back and get some sleep. You can stay awake and watch if you want. We aren't going anyplace tomorrow and you can sleep then."

Dave and Mitch grunted their approval. Randy let them precede him through the small opening back to the front cave. There Randy settled himself to go back to sleep.

"I know what I'll do," Dave said.

"I'll pile the sacks of corn in the opening. That'll keep the thing from coming out."

Mitch helped him, wedging the sacks into the opening so that they wouldn't dislodge easily.

They left the sack off the cave entrance so that the light of the moon shone in, giving them comfort.

Two hours later when the moon had dropped so that it was visible from inside the cave, its several pin-points of white brilliance glowing like flashing diamonds against a softly luminous disc, Dave had also fallen asleep, his snores blending in with those of Mitch and the deep, regular breathing of Randy.

But suddenly Randy's deep breathing stopped. He opened his eyes, blinking at the moon through the jagged opening to the outside.

In his sleep it had come to him where he had encountered the strange odor before. There had been a faint trace of it about Raymond, the Illusion Seeker.

He turned his head and stared speculatively at the sacks of corn wedged into the opening at the back of the cave. A conviction grew in him that whatever lurked beyond that opening was human, and perhaps very similar to Raymond. And himself.

His hand crept slowly to the gash in the shoulder of the coat he was wearing, the one that had belonged to Raymond. Whoever it was that had looked out at them lying there had probably seen that coat with its gash, being worn by one it obviously did not belong to.

Randy sat up and slid until his back was against the wall. He stared at the sacks of corn. After a while he crept over and placed an ear against them. No faintest sound came to him.

He stretched out with the side of his face against the sacks. If they

were moved the least bit the sound would awaken him. And shortly he was asleep.

"MITCH and I are going out for a walk to see what things are like around here," Dave said. "Maybe you'd better stay here so that animal back in the cave won't carry off our food."

"O.K.," Randy said, masking the delight in his eyes at this chance to carry out what he had in mind.

Dave and Mitch each picked up an ax and went out of the cave quickly before Randy could say anything about the axes. Outside they hurried to the right away from the road from the east until they were out of earshot of the cave.

"Well?" Dave muttered, stopping and fixing his eyes on Mitch. "Are we going through with it?"

"I'm for it," Mitch growled. "In some ways I like that kid. But the more I'm with him the more I hate him."

"Me too," Dave growled. "I look at the mass of freak fingers on the back of my hands and then look at his smooth hands. I think of how he waded into those wild dogs while we climbed a tree."

"That's the way I feel too," Mitch said. "He's ordered us around, made us do all the carrying. He's getting worse. He has a knack of making me feel the worst about myself. Like last night when he laughed at us about that thing back in the cave."

"We *could* just walk off and leave him," Dave suggested.

"Yes, we could," Mitch admitted. "But he'd follow us and make us come back. And we would. I don't relish facing his ax."

"We'd better not try anything until tomorrow," Dave said. "The three days are up then, and we'll be under the full protection of the charm. Then

I'm for killing him."

"How'll we do it?" Mitch asked.

"Whatever way looks best," Dave said. "He isn't suspicious any more. It should be easy enough. We could catch him without his ax and jump on him together, knocking his head against the rock floor of the cave."

"Yeah," Mitch said, "and shove his body back in the other cave and plug up the hole. Then that thing back there could have a feast—if it likes meat."

"Let's stay out a while and look around," Dave said.

IN THE CAVE Randy waited until he felt sure Dave and Mitch were not coming back for anything they might have forgotten, then he went to the hole in the back of the cave and hurriedly pulled out the sacks of corn.

Without hesitation he crawled through the small opening and stood up. The daylight threw a beam of white brilliance across the cavern to light up the far wall, a hundred yards away. From there the light rebounded to light up the whole cavern enough to make out its details.

The walls and roof were very irregular. There were many areas of dark shadow where a creature could hide and watch him. Randy's eyes explored each dark shadow, hoping for a glimpse of whatever had alarmed Dave the night before. There was nothing.

There was nothing he could see. And yet he felt eyes upon him. Eyes that studied him. The feeling made him uncomfortable.

"I know you're watching me," he said, his voice calm and loud. He waited until the echoes died down, then continued. "I'm not going to try to find you. I just want to talk to you. From your smell you are an Illusion Seeker, if there *is* another one besides Raymond. Do you know

Raymond, the Illusion Seeker? I knew him. This is his coat I have on. He gave it to me. He died—in an accident. I didn't kill him. His last words were that I should take his coat and the papers in it and follow the road from the east until I found someone who knew what it was all about.

"I'm not going to try to find you. If you don't want to come out, I'll respect your wish. If you come out I give you my protection. Raymond gave me a charm against all harm. You can't harm me, but by the same token I can protect you from all harm, if you are afraid on that score.

"My name is Randy. Randy Peters. My mother and father were killed by the breath of death, as were all where I came from except these two others with me, who are out taking a walk right now. I've said my piece. You can think it over. If you don't come out I will come back again tomorrow and wait here a while to give you a chance to come out."

He stopped talking and waited, his eyes searching for a first glimpse of something moving. When nothing appeared he turned and crawled back to the outer cave, stuffing the sacks of corn back into the hole the way they were before.

When Dave and Mitch returned he was sprawled with his back against the cave wall, seemingly half asleep.

\* \* \*

"IT'S THE third day," Randy said seriously during a pause in his noisy crunching of corn. It was still dark in the cave, though bright outside. The sun was above the horizon in the east and the cave faced west. "From now on you don't need to be afraid of anything. Nothing can hurt you—seriously." The memory of the gash in his leg from the teeth of one

of the dogs made him add that qualification.

Dave and Mitch nodded without pausing in their eating. A moment later Mitch's eyes gleamed toward Dave in secret amusement.

Without warning a tremendous roaring sound came from outside the cave. It began full blast and died with incredible rapidity toward the west.

Randy jumped up and dashed out of the cave.

"Come look at this!" he shouted excitedly.

Dave and Mitch jumped up, paused, nodded grimly at each other and took an ax as they stepped out of the cave.

Randy's back was to them, his arm upraised, pointing to something in the sky.

With quick savagery Mitch stepped forward and brought his ax down on Randy's head. At the last instant Randy seemed to sense what was happening. He jerked his head around and started to shift sideways as the ax connected with his head.

He stumbled backward, taking several off-balance, backward steps before falling, to lie inert, blood rapidly matting his thick blond hair.

"Got him!" Mitch whispered in fierce delight.

"Are you sure?" Dave asked.

For answer Mitch held up his ax. The blade was streaked with bright red three inches up. There it ended in a sharp delineation.

"Went that deep," Mitch said, laying a deformed fingernail against the line. "So he's dead all right."

"I get to wear Raymond's coat now," Dave said, pulling it off Randy's unresisting shoulders. "It won't go on you, Mitch."

They each took an arm and dragged Randy's lax body back into the cave. They let it drop and took

the sacks of corn away from the opening in back with feverish haste.

Then they tried to shove him through the opening. Finally Dave had to crawl inside and reach through. Mitch handed Randy's wrists to him, and by combined pulling and shoving they got him through.

Dave emerged from the hole. Together he and Mitch piled the sacks of corn up, wedging them in.

"Next thing is to collect some rocks and really plug this opening," Mitch said. "By the way, let's see what Randy was yelling about outside."

They went out and looked up at the sky. There was nothing except for three peculiar cloud formations. They were narrow, running parallel clear to the western horizon, white streaks that seemed only a few hundred feet in the air and a hundred or so feet apart.

As they watched, the cloud formations began to disintegrate and drift under the disrupting effect of the mild wind.

Mitch glanced at Dave with lifted eyebrows, shrugged his shoulders, and grinned.

"Just some funny clouds," he said.

"But that roaring," Dave frowned. "It was like the sound of that thing we saw before we caught up with Raymond, the Illusion Seeker."

"Maybe," Mitch said carelessly. "But it was louder. That can't have any connection with those queer clouds though. What could make clouds like that?"

"Guess you're right," Dave said. "Well," he went on, his tone light, "we're rid of Randy now. I never realized how much of a relief it would be."

"Now we can go back home," Mitch said. "And we don't need to fear anything."

"Not even dogs," Dave said with

quiet satisfaction. "I hope we meet some. It'll be fun to wade into them like Randy did."

"The weather's good," Mitch said. "Let's start now. It'll take maybe half an hour to wall up that back cave entrance. We can leave all the corn except what we'll need to reach the panhandle country. No use carrying it."

**R**ANDY awakened to a world of searing, soul-agonizing pain. He groaned and tried to open his eyes. They remained closed, so far as he could tell.

"It's all right," a voice sounded in his ears. It was a soothing female voice with rich, mothering tones. It arrested his attention. The pain receded slightly under the influence of this new presence. "You're going to be all right," the voice added. A gentle but firm hand put pressure against his chest. He lay back.

"Has he recovered—" But Randy didn't hear the rest of what a deep, male voice was asking.

When he recovered consciousness again he remembered it, with the feeling that he had been unconscious a long time since he had heard it.

This time he lay still, trying to think through the almost overwhelming pain throbbing inside his skull.

There had been a woman's voice, then a man's. They had been strange. What had happened? Had he been playing in the woods and fallen? No no. He wasn't a child any more. And his mother and father were dead.

There had been a roaring in the sky. He had rushed out of a cave in time to see three straight line streamers of clouds that seemed to come into being mysteriously from points moving toward the horizon.

The cave bothered him. He could remember running out of a cave, but



he couldn't remember anything about a cave other than that.

He had called to Mitch and Dave to come out and see those three streamers in the sky. Mitch and Dave? No, it was his father and Mitch.

And Mitch had hit him with an ax!

The memory caused him to try to rise.

"He's awake!" a voice shouted excitedly. It was a girl's voice.

Randy groaned. He remembered the girl's voice. He fainted again.

Something soft and cold poked at his lips. It wedged itself in, twisting and turning as it went in and rode over his tongue. His mouth was filling with a liquid. Its taste was pleasant, but nothing he had ever tasted before. Automatically he swallowed. His mouth filled again. He swallowed. The liquid reached his stomach. That made him aware that he was hungry. He swallowed eagerly, marveling at the coolness of the liquid. It was as cold as creek water when the snow is melting.

Suddenly memory made him aware that the searing pain in his head was gone. He stopped swallowing for a moment, then began again. A moment later he stopped once more, sighing in contentment.

He tried to open his eyes. When they wouldn't open he remembered they hadn't opened the first time he tried. There was something holding them closed, something that covered his forehead too.

"He took it all," the woman's voice said pleasantly. The flow of liquid stopped as she said this. The round cool thing in his mouth slid out and was gone. A cool drop fell on his cheek. Something soft wiped it off.

An impulse faster than thought made Randy's hand dart up and close about a wrist. He held it firm-

ly without pressure. It was smaller than his own. At once strong fingers wrapped over his wrist.

"Easy there, son," the male voice said warningly.

Randy consciously brought a smile to his lips and relaxed his grip, feeling the wrist pull loose.

"How long have I been asleep?" he asked.

"A couple of days," the male voice replied. "How do you feel?"

"All right I guess," Randy said after hesitating. "But I would have thought it was longer." He frowned, feeling the skin of his forehead wrinkle against something soft. "How long has it been since—" He stopped, unable to find the words.

"Since you were hurt?" the male voice asked. "Would it make any real difference to you how long?"

"Maybe," Randy said, wondering at the question. "But I guess not. I'll have to stay here until spring anyway."

There was a deep throaty chuckle. "You have all the time in the world," the male voice said soothingly. Abruptly it changed its tone, talking to someone else. "Stay here with him. He'll go back to sleep in a few minutes. Call me on your pocket radio when he wakes up."

There were footsteps. At least Randy thought they were footsteps, thought they sounded utterly strange. Like Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, walking on the road from the east, almost.

Randy listened to them. Unconsciously he curled the fingers of his right hand. They dug into something yielding and soft. Softer than anything except hair or fur, yet more like cloth.

"ARE YOU awake?"

It was the male voice, more

than familiar now. It almost seemed that it had always been a part of things. Its owner was Paul.

"We have a surprise for you today," the motherly female voice said. Randy smiled. That voice belonged to Martha.

"Dad's going to take off the bandages this morning," the girl's voice broke in eagerly. That voice belonged to Grace.

Randy turned his head toward the direction of her voice, his smile broadening. He lifted up on his elbows. Hands took him and helped him rise to a sitting position. Thick soft objects dropped behind him until he could lean back in their yielding depths comfortably. They were pillows. Martha had told him what they were. He was in bed. There were blankets and sheets over and under him. They were the extent of his physical world. He was more familiar with them than almost anything else. He was looking forward to seeing what they looked like.

"Yes," Paul said, "the bandages come off this morning. But you'd better shave him first, Grace, so he'll look his best when he sees himself in the mirror."

"Shave?" Randy asked goodnaturedly. "What's that?"

Paul and Martha chuckled happily but didn't answer. Grace's footsteps went away, returning immediately. A strange humming started suddenly. Immediately afterward something cold and metallic touched his face, moving lightly along his cheek, tickling strangely.

Wondering, Randy reached his hand up and touched his face. His fingers encountered soft hair. Its implication so startled him that he sat erect.

"How long have I been here?" he demanded. He turned his head blindly, waiting for an answer.

"I guess we muffed that one," Paul's voice came regretfully. "It's been four years since you were hit on the head with an ax."

"Take off the bandage," Randy said hoarsely. He reached up, tearing at it himself.

"Easy there," Paul said. "Give me time." There was worried concern in his tone.

Randy waited impatiently while fingers fumbled about his head. The bandage had come off many times before, but only with his solemn promise to keep his eyes closed.

Now he was straining to open them. To see. Four years! And he had thought it only a few weeks! It *had* been only a few weeks.

The pressure on his eyelids lessened. He opened them. A latticework of white was all he saw. Whiter than anything except the whitest of clouds in the sky with blue around it.

It shifted, blurred, moved away. He fought the pain and dizziness that came with vision. His eyes turned hungrily from one to another of the three faces. Paul was much like Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, though his nose was different, and his chin, and almost everything except that his face had no hair, and his expression was like Raymond's had been that first time. Martha was something more wonderful than the dreams of madness could conjure up, yet there was something undefinably like his mother in her expression, her eyes.

Grace—she was very beautiful. Her eyes were deep pools of dark blue filmed with the brightness of tears. Randy felt a vague disappointment though. She was older than he. Maybe twenty or twenty-one.

But—four years! Four and seventeen were twenty-one.

"Get the mirror, Grace," Paul said quietly.

And shortly Randy was looking

into a *nothing* framed in a narrow blue circle, and from the depths of that *nothing* a face stared back at him. Slowly he realized that that face was his own.

There was a straw colored fuzziness growing within the normal confines of a beard, with the exception of an area on one cheek corresponding with where Grace had run the thing that buzzed,

Randy sank back weakly. Now he believed.

**T**IME PASSED swiftly. The shock of learning he was now twenty-one wore off. There was a continual succession of things just as startling.

Grace told Randy what had happened. She had been out exploring when she first saw him and Dave and Mitch coming. She had hidden in the cave, only to find them coming toward it.

Frightened, she had retreated to the back of the cave, discovered the small opening that led back still further, and crept through. Safe for the time being, she had listened to them. To her horror she had heard Randy announce with finality that they would remain in the cave all winter.

"My only hope," she went on with her story, "was to wait until you were all asleep and sneak past you. But the one with the thick beard and funny little fingers growing all over the backs of his hands woke up and saw me. He woke you, and all three of you came after me.

"When you came through and stood there looking for me I was only ten feet away, pressed as close against the wall as I could get."

Randy listened, his eyes drinking in the beauty of her lustrous brown hair and the utter perfection of her beauty as compared to feminine beau-

ty as he had seen it all his life in his mother with her bulbous, soft-boned skull and scraggly uncombed hair, and the other women and girls he had known.

"When you went back," she continued, "and plugged up my only avenue of escape, I was panic stricken. I didn't know what to do. The next day when you came in alone and talked I liked you, but I was still afraid of the other two. Shaggy, dirty brutes with evil eyes. I decided to wait and see what happened. I wasn't as afraid any more though, because I felt that if I revealed myself you would be my friend.

"Then the sacks were pulled away and they dragged you in. They were talking, saying they were going to wall up the opening and leave you there for some animal to eat. They also said they were going away right away.

"I risked discovery by going to you as soon as the big one had gone back into the front cave. While they were bringing in rocks and walling up the hole I was determining that you were still alive. How nearly dead you were, I didn't fully realize then."

Paul took up the story.

"The ax had bit through your skull into your brain," he said. "For three weeks it was extremely doubtful you would live. When you did recover you didn't know who you were, and you were partially paralyzed. Part of your body has had to learn all over again just like when you were a baby, while new neural passages took over the duties of the severed section of your brain.

"Eight months after you came here you were yourself for a brief moment. That encouraged us. We knew that eventually you would remember. And after four years you do. New contacts have been formed in your

brain that reconnect the cut parts."

"It's really been a miracle," Martha said.

"No, not a miracle," Randy said quietly.

He didn't elaborate that aloud, but in his thoughts he was remembering that Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, had given him a charm against all harm. The pack of wild dogs had succeeded in merely gashing his leg, where they had always killed quickly. Mitch had split his skull with an ax, and still he lived.

RANDY became acquainted with shoes, a fork, knife, and spoon, with cooked food, rooms with walls that were smooth and in restful colors. He watched a strange contrivance spin a flat disc slowly and produce music as strange and wonderful as the tune Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, had been whistling when Randy first saw him on the road to the east. He watched a strange flat thing like the mirror except that it reflected things not there, and learned it was wire-recorded television, in color, with sound.

It was high as a man and twice as wide. With the lights in the room dimmed, Grace touched knobs that made the white expanse come to life.

In its depths Randy grew familiar with a world that seemed utterly fantastic to him, in which four legged animals called horses carried men swiftly across wild country in what Grace called "Westerns", people in strange clothes carried out the plots of murder, intrigue, and adventure, and strange machines and structures became almost commonplace in their infinite repetitions.

The scenes where ships leaving trails of white clouds behind them interested him most. In one picture he followed several ships as they left the Earth and went to the Moon.

The Moon itself was fascinating. Randy recognized it in the screen. He saw it enlarge. Its surface rushed by swiftly, showing huge transparent domes over the tops of craters fifty miles across, under which cities could be seen.

He traveled the streets of cities on the Earth and on the Moon. He saw buildings that seemed to extend into the sky.

And once he saw what Grace called a space opera, in which a buttercup yellow ship with a black nose was wrecked on an alien asteroid. Out of the wreck climbed alien creatures that walked upright like humans and spoke in incomprehensible sounds. Outside the wrecked ship, they huddled together, looking up into a reddish tinted sky. And suddenly a huge sphere of light appeared in the sky, alive with depths of blue and white, and from its depths appeared the face of a woman more beautiful than any Randy had ever seen. There followed a display of blasting force that destroyed the sphere in the sky. And this haunted Randy's dreams for several nights. But nothing he saw in the screen seemed real. It was some form of magic, not reality.

He had no curiosity about the limits of his immediate world. He didn't know where he was. He didn't even wonder where he was. He was content.

As the weeks passed and he grew accustomed to his surroundings, he grew to believe that nothing could ever happen to disrupt things. Then two things happened in swift succession.

Grace had become his almost constant companion, taking up the game of reading and writing where his mother had left off, and producing books and paper that opened up another new world to him. One day

while they were sitting close together while she encouraged him to puzzle out the words in a book he felt a sudden uncomfortable awareness of her presence beside him. He drew away from her.

"What's the matter, Randy?" Grace asked.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "Suddenly I felt funny sitting by you. Where your side touched me my skin started to burn. Right now I feel—not scared exactly, but trembly. I—I want to grab you and—I don't know what. Did you ever feel that way? I don't know how to explain it."

"Would you feel that way about Paul or Martha?" Grace asked, her eyes twinkling.

"I don't know," Randy said. "This is the first time I ever felt this way." He frowned in the concentration in self analysis. "Let's go find them and see if I feel this way toward them," he said in sudden decision.

"O.K.," Grace said, turning her head away to hide her smile.

She took his hand as they left the room, and it was perspiring. He pulled loose uncomfortably.

"Don't tell them about it," she said. "They're probably in their living room reading. Let's just go in and see if you feel that way toward them."

"Yeah," Randy agreed.

Grace took his hand and squeezed it. He jerked it away quickly, his breath coming fast.

"Don't do that," he said.

Grace laughed delightedly.

They went into the living room casually as they had done many times before. Grace watched Randy with secret amusement in her eyes as he studied the two covertly.

Finally he looked over at her and shrugged his shoulders in mystification, shaking his head. He didn't feel that way toward them.

"What are you walking around so restlessly about Randy?" Martha asked, looking up from a book she was reading.

"I was trying to find out something," he answered seriously.

"He suddenly felt funny near me while we were reading together," Grace said with an air of naive innocence. "He never felt that way before, and can't describe it very well. He's been trying to see if he felt that way near you two."

"Oh?" Paul said, looking up from his own book with a glint of humor in his eyes. "And do you feel that way near me, Randy?"

Randy shook his head. "No. Just near Grace."

"How does it feel?" Paul pursued the subject with delight.

"Funny," Randy said matter-of-factly. "My skin burns. I'm short of breath like I'd been running. My heart pounds against my ribs. I—" He looked over at Grace with an apologetic smile. "I feel like I want to pull Grace down on the floor and rumple her hair and—and—I don't know what."

"Would you like for him to do things like that, Grace?" Paul asked, turning his twinkling eyes on her. She nodded her head vigorously and frankly. He added, "Then why don't you two go back to the general living room and leave your mother and me to our books?" He glanced slyly at Randy, who looked frightened. "Go on, go on," he insisted with feigned impatience. "I want to read."

Grace ran from the room with a delighted laugh. Randy hesitated, looked pleadingly at Martha, then followed Grace slowly.

When he had left the room Paul and Martha looked at each other, then broke into laughter.

THE SECOND thing happened less than twenty-four hours after the world of sex had opened up to Randy, leaving him staggering and in a semi-conscious state of bliss.

This second thing was a strange voice talking to Paul and Martha in a room where Randy had never been permitted to go.

He had never been overly curious about this room. It was a place Paul or Martha went when a red light in their living room flashed on. After one of them went into it and closed the door the red light died out in the globe, and they came back shortly. Nothing was ever said to Randy about what went on there, and he had never asked.

This time Randy and Grace had been alone in the general living room when Martha knocked on the door and came in.

"It's the census, Grace," she said. "You have to come."

"Oh," Grace said. "You stay here, Randy. I'll be back shortly." She kissed him.

After she had gone Randy decided on impulse to go talk to Paul. He rose and went into the hall in time to see the door of the forbidden room closing.

He couldn't find Paul. His search led him near the forbidden door. Voices came through, and one of them was a strange voice.

"There are just the three of you living here?" it asked.

"That's all," Paul's voice answered. "Just the three of us."

"I have to ask that question, you know," the strange voice said. "I'm even supposed to look through the house to see if you might have some variant child hidden. But how can they expect us to search every house? We'd never get our work done. Be seeing you next year." There was the gentle slam of a door.

Footsteps sounded, approaching. Randy hurried away, reaching the entrance to the general living room just in time. When Grace entered the room he was sitting in a chair turning the pages of the dictionary.

"Just increasing my vocabulary," he said, looking up with a casual smile.

She came over and sat on the arm of the chair. The dictionary was open to the V's. Randy turned the pages slowly. He had learned the meaning of the word variant.

"See any words you don't know the meaning of?" Grace asked.

"Let's see," Randy said. "I think I saw one in the middle of the book I don't know."

He slammed the book closed while they both chuckled at the absurdity of his statement. But Randy's laugh didn't reflect in his eyes.

"I think I'll lie down and take a nap," he said. "Do you mind, Grace?"

"Of course not," she said. "I'll call you when dinner is ready."

Randy went to his own room and lay down. His thoughts were in confusion. He had assumed without question that Paul, Martha, and Grace were a family along the pattern of his own as it had been. Incurious about its neighbors if there were any.

He had assumed that most of those neighbors would have various differences such as areas of thick pulpy skin, soft bones, extra appendages, huge head, and all the types of differences he had seen.

The room he was forbidden to enter made sense according to his conceptions as they had been since childhood. It was a room where strangers were met, to keep them away from the others. His own mother and father had often made him hide under something when he was small, so that neighbors couldn't see him.

But this was different. A picture

was forming, in which his position was precarious. It was vague, fragmentary. Paul, Martha, and Grace were keeping him hidden because he was a variant. But he wasn't! That made it confusing. And if he were found, what would happen?

A panorama of all he had learned in this new world he had awakened to rose before him. The recorded television had shown people, all of them like himself, and none like those who had been struck down by virus plague. They were of all ages. There were a thousand other things that pointed to people in books and on the television having none of the things the dictionary called variant.

Maybe if he had any children they would be variants. Maybe that was what it was all about. But there was nothing wrong with that. People were people. No one was better than someone else—or if they were, his father was better than he was because his father had had very beautiful thumbs with several small thumbnails fanned out on miniature thumbs.

It didn't make sense. He would have to ask about it.

\* \* \*

"WHAT'S THE matter, Randy?"

Paul asked, after dinner. "You're being awfully quiet. Something on your mind?"

"Yes," Randy said. "I was wondering, if Grace and I had a boy or girl, would it be like us?"

"Oh," Paul said with relief. "I suppose so. Of course it would be like you."

"It wouldn't have soft bones like my mother?" Randy asked.

"Of course not!" Paul said.

"Then," Randy said, taking a deep breath, "why am I like you—as Raymond, the Illusion Seeker, was—instead of soft-boned like my mother or with fingers on the backs of my hands like my father?"

"You just weren't, that's all," Paul said worriedly. He frowned at the tablecloth for a minute. "Randy," he said abruptly, "I think the time has come to tell you everything we've kept hiding from you."

"No!" Grace said.

"If he doesn't learn everything he won't rest until he does—now," Paul said.

"Your father's right, Grace," Martha said gravely.

"First I'm going to answer your question of a minute ago," Paul said. "Yes, it's more than probable that if you ever have any children they will have differences of the kind you mentioned." He held up the palm of his hand as Randy started to speak. "Let me go on. There's a lot more for you to know in order to understand."

"Long ago, it was almost five hundred years ago, all people were like us here. There weren't any soft bones or extra fingers in the wrong places, or anything like that. I won't go into the details of what happened. But slowly people like your mother and father, and those two who tried to kill you, came into existence. It was known what had caused it, but there wasn't any way to stop it once it got started, except by trying to keep those people from having children, because, although normal people sometimes had children like that, those people almost never had normal children."

"By normal I mean people who were like the race had been before it started changing. Normal is a purely relative term. So don't misunderstand me and get the idea I look down on people who aren't normal according to the race standard."

"It became a very serious problem. One group of normal people believed that all the variants should be killed and all variant babies born put to death. Another group believed that variants should just be fixed so they



couldn't have children. That group won out, and a law was passed.

"But the variants didn't agree with what was to be done to them. They believed that they had as much right to have children as anyone else. So a lot of them ran away and settled down in places far away from the rest of us.

"That was as good an answer to the problem as any, in a way, so nothing was done to them—then, that is. The death rate among them was high due to lack of doctors and the general weakness of a variant body.

"As time rolled on the normal people occasionally made trips through variant country to study the changes in the variant population. Scientists studied inheritance characteristics of the various variant forms.

"When it became certain that the variant population would never become normal again the first group tried to get their belief accepted, to kill all variants. They didn't succeed, but they gained a lot of adherents in their belief who were convinced that eventually the human race would become contaminated by the wild characteristics unless something was done.

"An ideal tool to carry out their plans was discovered in the form of a virus disease discovered and used at the time the variants first appeared. It was virus plague, a disease that was fatal while it lasted, but died out quickly so that in a few days after it wiped out a population other people could come in without danger of catching it.

"The fanatics used this, killing all the people in one spot with it, then waiting until indignation died down and striking somewhere else. They went through the district on foot, making sure all normal people got the antidote to protect them from it, then sprayed the virus plague from planes."

"No!" Randy said hoarsely, rising

to his feet. "You're wrong! Raymond didn't do that! He said he didn't do that!"

"LET ME go on," Paul said gently.

"I didn't say he did or didn't. It's not for me to say. May I go on talking?"

Randy sat down again slowly.

"A hundred and fifty years ago—it was in 2254, I think," Paul went on calmly, "a man by the name of d'Vorac published his statistical studies of the human race. He proved or seemed to prove, though the question is still disputed, that the so-called normal race was already so contaminated by variant genes that in a few hundred more years it would be entirely variant.

"He called the concept of the norm an illusion. He called those who advocated killing off variants as fast as they were born to preserve a normal human race *seekers after an illusion*. The race-purity fanatics immediately brought out a book using the same data but a different theory of genetics to prove he was wrong. They took up his accusation that they were seekers after an illusion and started calling themselves the Illusion Seekers. They were proud of the title."

"But it can't be so!" Randy said. "Not Raymond! He was not like that. I'll never believe it, no matter what you say."

"There are books you can read," Paul said. "They'll tell you the—"

"Papers!" Randy interrupted him. "That's it! Raymond, the Illu—Raymond gave me his coat. There were papers in it I was supposed to take across the rock mountains along the road from the east until I met someone who knew what they were about. Where are those papers?"

Paul looked at Grace questioningly.

"Dave had it," she said. "He was wearing it when he pulled you through

the opening into the back cave."

"Then I've got to find him," Randy said.

"But that was four years ago, Randy," Paul objected. "You can't find him now. What were the papers? Do you remember anything about them?"

"Not much," Randy said. "I tried to read them, but they were mostly numbers put together and letters of the alphabet that didn't mean anything. What I could read had so many words I didn't know the meanings of that I couldn't understand anything. Maybe I could now. I know more words."

"Where would you look for him?" Martha spoke up, breaking her silence.

"He would go back home, to the Cour d'Alene country," Randy said. "He never wanted to leave it. He'll still be alive because I—" He hesitated, then concluded lamely, "I gave him the powder to protect him."

"He wouldn't still have the papers." Paul objected.

"Yes he will," Randy said. "He was there when Raymond said how important they were. He'd never destroy them or lose them. I *know* those papers will prove I'm right. Raymond did not kill all those people."

"It means a lot to you, doesn't it." Paul said. "All right. I guess we need a trip. We've been cooped up a long time. We'll all go look for Raymond's coat." He frowned. "But we'll have to be careful. You're not registered, Randy."

"Registered?" Randy echoed.

"That's why we've been hiding you," Paul explained. "If it were known you were here, a person of unregistered parents, you would be arrested and fixed so you can't have any children."

"But why?" Randy asked. "I thought you said the race-purity fanatics weren't right. You don't believe

they're right do you?"

"I also said," Paul said patiently, "that there were sterilization laws for variants. Those laws drove your ancestors into hiding."

"Then I must always stay hidden?" Randy asked.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," Paul said. "There's a lot of pressure to change that law. But let's forget that for now. We've got to get ready for our trip."

THEY rose from the table. Paul hurried to the forbidden door. Martha took charge of the packing, bringing out travel cases which Randy marveled at.

"We'll take the coptor," Grace explained to Randy. "This isn't far from where I found you in the cave. You see, this place we own is a rural home. There's lots of them scattered through the badland strip. History says this was once fertile land with lots of things growing in it, but an enemy sprayed a plant hormone that made things grow so fast they died before they could produce seeds. When all the plants died everything else did, or moved out. Then there wasn't any grass roots or tree roots to keep the soil from being washed away by the rains."

"We were pretty worried about Grace that time," Martha said as she worked at packing clothes into the cases. "She was gone for three days. We went out looking for her but couldn't find her. We'd just about decided she was dead."

"I ran all the way home to get help to you," Grace said. "It's about three miles."

"So you're trying to escape!" a new voice broke with startling suddenness from the doorway.

While Martha and Grace gasped in alarm Randy turned swiftly, having

already identified the speaker from his voice. It was the census taker. He stood in the doorway, a gun pointed at him.

"You shouldn't have walked around while I was here," the census taker said to Randy. "I heard your footsteps even while they were denying there was anyone else here."

"Where's Paul?" Martha asked anxiously, stepping forward.

"Get back, lady," the census taker said, waving his gun toward her.

That was the chance Randy had been waiting for. In a movement too swift to follow he scooped up an open, half-filled travel case and threw it at the man in the doorway.

The census taker fired at Randy, but he was already instinctively ducking the bewildering mass of clothing toward him.

The tigerish unerring swiftness with which he had fought the two packs of wild dogs was with him again. He plucked the gun from the man's fist and let it fly across the room.

The man tried to back away. Randy's hands shot out swiftly. His fingers wrapped into the man's hair securely. He pulled him toward him with a downward force that pulled the man off his feet. His face hit the floor with a resounding thud. Randy grinned wolfishly and began pounding the head against the floor.

"No, Randy!" Grace was shouting. "Don't kill him!"

Her hands were pulling at him. He paused and looked at her, surprised.

"Why not?" he asked in surprise. "He'll go back and tell the others, and they'll come after me."

"No!" Grace repeated forcefully.

Randy got up reluctantly. The census taker lay still for a moment, then rolled over with a deep groan. His nose was smashed flat and bleeding profusely. His face was red and bruised.

"You'll regret that," he said woodenly. "I reported where I was before I came back. A ship is already on the way here to take you in as a variant or unregistered person. Now there's a charge of attacking an officer with intent to kill. And there's a charge of harboring against the others."

"I've got to see what's happened to Paul," Martha said anxiously.

Ignoring the census taker she started past him through the doorway. He seized her ankle, which was a mistake. Instantly Randy's foot shot out and caught him full in the mouth with all the crushing force of the stiff-soled shoe crashing into teeth.

Martha hurried on down the hall. Randy went across the room and retrieved the gun, holding it by the barrel like it was a hammer.

The census taker was shaking his head dazedly and spitting teeth when Martha's scream came from the forbidden room.

Randy brought the butt of the gun down on the census taker's head in one sharp blow. Then Grace and he were running toward the source of the anguished cry.

The door was open. Martha was bending over the unconscious form of Paul who lay in the middle of the mottled blue floor.

"OHHH," PAUL groaned, sitting up and touching the back of his head tenderly. "He blackjacked me when I tried to keep him out."

"I'll go back and kill him," Randy said fiercely.

"No," Paul said. "Get the packing finished. We've got to get out of here before the ship comes to pick you up, Randy. Hurry! All of you."

Moments later Randy saw a copter for the first time. But there was no time to pause and admire it. There were travel cases to load on board, and Paul to carry and set in a seat.

Grace pressed a button on the wall and the roof of the room the coptor was in slid back with a rumbling noise. Then they were all in the ship, the doors closed, and Martha was at the controls.

Randy looked up and saw the huge blades jerk into movement that quickly became a blur. The ship lifted so smoothly that it seemed to stand still while the walls of the room dropped away.

Abruptly the rock country of the badlands strip appeared. Randy saw the structure he had been living in for the first time. It was of white stone similar to the stone of the road from the east. Concrete.

Then it was gone, and the rock country was moving by below at dizzy speed. Randy watched it with the same feeling of its unreality as he had experienced while watching the television screen.

Paul sat up, feeling better. Martha asked him if he wanted to take the controls.

"You're doing all right," he said. Then after a long silence, "Well, we're off to our new home, wherever it is."

"What do you mean?" Randy asked. "Aren't we coming back?"

"Martha, Grace, and I could come back," Paul said. "But we'd face a heavy fine that would take our home away from us anyway, and have to serve long prison sentences. We'd never see you again. I think we all prefer to stay with you and find a home where we'll be together."

In so short a time that Randy couldn't believe it, the rock country ended. He recognized his own locality as they passed over it. In fifteen minutes the coptor circled the mountain he had taken two days to cross and emerged into the Cour d'Alene country with its large wandering lake.

Now Randy searched the ground closely, trying to catch some sign of

movement that would indicate the presence of a man.

"They may hide when they hear the coptor," Martha said, "but we can search more territory in an hour from the air than we can in weeks on foot."

"There they are!" Randy said suddenly a few minutes later, pointing.

There was no mistaking the two figures below. Mitch's short squat figure, and Dave's tall frame and heavily bearded face. The two were standing in a clearing looking up at the coptor.

"Is there any way to drop from the coptor without it going down to the ground?" Randy asked.

Paul pointed to a trap door in the floor.

"It'll scare the daylights out of them," Randy said gleefully. "Drop down to about ten feet. I'll lift the trap door and drop in front of them. I hope they recognize me."

While Martha dropped the coptor toward the two on the ground, Randy examined the automatic he had taken from the census taker. Grace worriedly showed him how to work it.

"Be careful, Randy," she said. "They almost killed you!"

"So far as they know they did kill me," Randy grinned.

It was Grace that lifted the trap door. Randy looked down and got his bearing, then jumped.

HE LANDED hard, but caught himself and stood up. Dave and Mitch were staring at him, their eyes large and round. Randy couldn't be sure whether they were frozen with fear, or holding their ground because of curiosity. There was no recognition on their faces.

The coptor swerved to one side and settled to the ground with a slight bump, its blades whirling idly.

Randy was to remember that scene often during the rest of his life. Dave and Mitch standing motionless, the

coptor to one side with Grace's face against the window, a worried expression on her face, and he standing there with the gun in his hand, waiting for Dave and Mitch to recognize him, the man they thought they had killed.

Into that scene suddenly appeared something unexpected. It was a composite of events too swift to interpret. A loud shrill whine from the coptor, dirt jumping up strangely in little spurts like water splashing up when a pebble is dropped in it, a flash of memory of seeing the same type of thing on the television screen, the sight of Dave and Mitch being picked up by invisible hands and flung backwards, and himself falling to the ground as he had seen men do in the television. Then there was a blast of deafening sound followed by a dwindling roar as his eyes followed the shape hurtling upward at a steep angle.

It was a jet plane with red wings and a blue body, the symbol of the police. The plane was circling to return. Randy glanced at Dave and Mitch. They were obviously dead.

He thought of and rejected the idea of getting up and running. The plane had completed its turn and was a slowly growing circle of blue on a red line, with bright flashes appearing from spots on the red line.

Randy ducked his head and held his breath. He could feel the ground around him jump from the impact of bullets. Then the roar came again, dwindling rapidly.

He lifted his head. The plane was heading toward the east. In a few seconds it was gone.

He got up shakily. It was the impact on his mind of the reality of what he had just gone through that affected him. It was something he had seen on the television screen many times, without ever really believing it could happen.

He ran to the coptor which was

perforated with holes. The lift blades were motionless, one of them bent and punctured.

He pulled open the door and looked inside at the shambles, then exclaimed in relief. Paul, Martha, and Grace were huddled in as compact a space as they could get, and unharmed.

"Is he gone?" Paul asked anxiously.

"Yes," Randy said. "But let's get into the woods quick. He may decide to come back and land."

**A**N HOUR later they crept back to the coptor and the bodies of Dave and Mitch.

"I don't think they recognized me," Randy said, disappointed.

Paul was ruefully inspecting the damage to the coptor. "It looks like we're stuck here for good," he said.

Randy wasn't listening. He was bending over Dave, searching in the pockets of the tattered coat. His hand came out with some dirty, torn papers.

He unfolded them anxiously, his fingers trembling with excitement.

"These are the papers," he said, glancing over his shoulder triumphantly at Paul.

"Put them away," Paul said. "We can look at them later. Right now we've got to salvage all we can from the coptor and find out where we're going to spend the night."

"Wait," Randy said. "I can read them now. They make sense."

Grace had joined him and was reading over his shoulder. Paul joined them, studying the faded writing.

"Hmm," he said. "So Raymond was a geneticist. I see what he was doing. He was studying families, typing their variant factors and the way they were distributed in the offspring. This is a report."

"Then I was right," Randy said. "He didn't kill people by spreading the virus."

"I didn't say that," Paul said. "I think when you have time to study this more you'll see that he did spread the virus. These figures seem to indicate he was classifying the variant factors according to their dominant and recessive properties to show that they are permanent mutations. What does this say here on the last sheet?"

He took the paper from Randy and studied the almost obliterated script.

"These figures weren't data from this locality," he said after reading a few lines. "Wait a minute. I think I'm coming to something definite. Here it is.

"The above data," he read, "proves conclusively that every living human now has some variant factor. The program of extermination will never produce a pure strain again. D'Vorac's conclusions were correct."

Paul folded the paper.

"These figures were gathered from the files of hospitals," he said. "They show that one out of every five babies born to normal parents is a variant."

Suddenly, angrily, he tore up the papers and threw them away.

"What did you do that for?" Randy asked.

"If I hadn't you'd want to take them on what you call the road from the east," Paul said. "We're going to make our home right here someplace. You and Grace are going to have your

children without some doctor killing the variants. I'm through with this stupid slaughtering of innocent victims of mankind's past crimes."

"But if we could take Raymond's papers to the Illusion Seekers and prove to them—" Randy said.

"They already know," Paul said. "Raymond copied these figures from some other report and was merely doing his own checking. I understand him. I've felt the same way. Every normal person feels that way, or the Illusion Seekers couldn't exist. It's a horrible thing. Martha and I had three children before Grace came. They were variants—"

He turned away abruptly and picked up two of the travel cases, striding toward the edge of the woods without looking back.

"What's the matter with him?" Randy asked with an embarrassed laugh. "Why doesn't he look back to see if we're coming with him?"

"It isn't the time to look back," Martha said quietly. "The time to look back was long ago."

She picked up one of the smaller cases and followed her husband.

Grace crept close to Randy. Randy put his arm around her absently, his troubled eyes following Martha's straight back and lifted head.

He was bewildered. He didn't understand.

## TWENTY YEARS HENCE?



By H. R. STANTON



**T**WENTY YEARS isn't a long time as years go—and then again it's an eternity. You've accepted the miracle of radio and television, you've casually seen the emergence of the atomic age, you've seen space conquered by the ingenuity of rocket-men and jet-men.

It's hard to realize that the major impulse which actuated all these things—the "coming-out party" of the radio tube—is only a little more than twenty years ago. Around nineteen-thirty the miraculous expansion of that unbelievable concoction of glass and metal called a vacuum tube, started. Almost all of the things we use

now were hovering delicately in the spiritual "air."

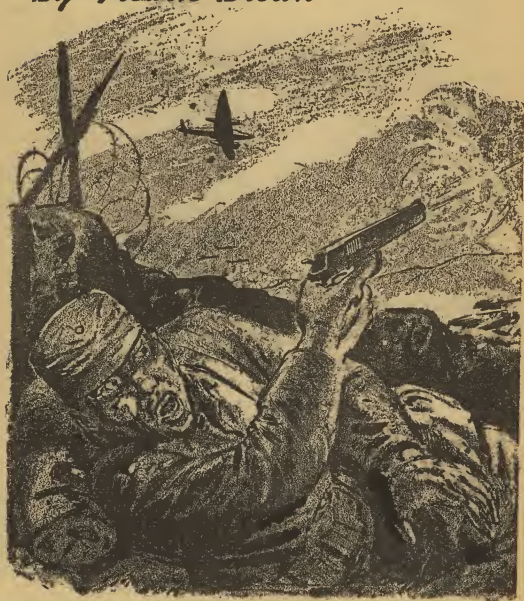
These twenty years have reaped the fruits of that coming-out. No matter what you name that concerns the immediate future you're bound to include things which depend in a straight line, right on that radio tube. They dress it up with fancy names: they call it a cyclotron or cathode ray tube, but it's a radio tube.

The next time you turn on the radio or flip the switch on TV, just give a thought to the magnificent job the hidden servants are doing—and try to imagine the next twenty years—if you can!

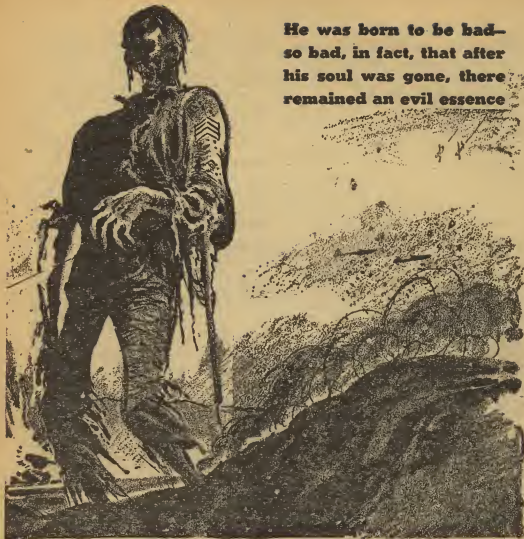


# From These Ashes

*By Fredric Brown*







**He was born to be bad—  
so bad, in fact, that after  
his soul was gone, there  
remained an evil essence**

*It swayed there, and from the dead, broken hulk of flesh came radiations of hate...*

*Listing from the World Biographical Dictionary, 1970 Edition: DIX, John, b. Louisville, Ky., U.S.A., Feb. 1, 1940; son Harvey R. (saloonkeeper) and Elizabeth (Bailey); student Louisville Public Schools 1946-1954; ran away from home at 14, worked as pin boy, bell hop; sentenced 6 mos. Birmingham, Ala., 1958, charge:*

*procuring; enlisted U.S. Army, 1959, fought as private in Chi-Com war, 1959-1961; reported missing in Battle of Panamints, 1961; led Revolution of 1962, became President of United States Aug. 5, 1962; Dictator of North America, Apr. 10, 1963; died at age of 23 yrs. June 14, 1963.*

THE CONCRETE of the pillbox was still moist. As Johnny Dix peered out of the slit, over the sights of the machine gun, he touched it with his finger and hoped it had hardened enough to stop the bullets of the yellow men.

A heavy pall of dense smoke hung over the foothills of the Panamints. On the slope behind the pillbox, the roar of the American artillery was thunderous. And ahead, less than a mile away, the mobile guns of the ChiComs thundered back.

"They're coming," Johnny Dix threw back over his shoulder. His companion's ear was a foot away but Johnny had to yell to make himself heard. "Get next belt ready. Gotta hold 'em."

Got to hold them. It ran through his mind like a refrain. This was the last fully prepared line of defense, hastily constructed though it was. Behind them was Death Valley; it would live up to its grim name if they were shoved back into those open, arid wastes. Out in the open there, the mechanized forces of the yellow men would mow them down like wheat.

But for three days now, the Panamint Line had held. Hammered by steel from the ground and steel from the air, it had held. The momentum of the Commies had slackened; they'd even been pushed back a little. This pillbox was one of a new line of outposts, hastily thrown up last night under cover of darkness.

Something black and ugly—the nose of a huge tank—pushed through the smoke and haze. Johnny Dix let go the hot handgrips of the chatter-gun, useless against the coming monster, and nudged his companion.

He yelled, "Tank going to cross the mine! The switch! Now!"

The ground under their prone bodies shook with the terrific concussion of the exploding mine. Deafened

and temporarily blinded by the blast that turned the monster tank into scrap iron, they did not hear the screaming dive of the plane.

The bomb it released struck a scant yard from the pillbox. And the pillbox wasn't there any more.

They should both have been killed instantly, but only one of them was. Life can be tenacious. The thing that had been Johnny Dix wriggled and rolled over. One arm—the other was gone—flailed about, the fingers clutching as though searching for the grip of the machine gun that lay yards away. One eye stared upward unseeing above a gaping bloody hole that once had been a nose. Helmet had been blown away and with it most of hair and scalp.

The mangled thing, no longer living but not yet dead, twisted again and began to crawl.

Back swooped the plane. Explosive bullets of its prop-gun plowed a furrow of destruction that crossed the crawling thing above its knees, almost cutting off the legs. Dying fingers clutched spasmodically at the soil of earth and then relaxed.

Johnny Dix was dead. But accident had timed with hair-trigger precision the instant of his death. His mangled body lived.

THE NAMELESS entity whom we shall call the Stranger paused in his interplanar swing. He had perceived something that should not have been.

He went back a plane. Not there. Another. Yes, this was it. A plane of *matter*, and yet he perceived emanations of consciousness. It was a paradox, a sheer contradiction. There were the planes of consciousness and there were the planes of physical matter—but never the two together.

The Stranger—a non-material point in space, a focus of consciousness, an

entity—paused amid the whirling stars of the matter-plane. These were familiar to him, common to all the matter-planes. But here there was something different. Consciousness, where there should be no consciousness. A foreign *kind* of consciousness. His perception seemed to tell him that it was allied with *matter*, but that was a complete contradiction in concepts. Matter was matter; consciousness was consciousness. The two could not be as one.

The emanations were faint. Then he found that by decreasing his time-motion he could make them stronger. He continued the decrease until he had passed the point of maximum strength and then went back to it. They were clear now, but the stars no longer whirled. Almost motionless they hung against the curved curtain of infinity.

The Stranger now began to move—to shift the focus of his thought—toward the star from which the ambiguous emanations came, toward the point which he now perceived to be the third planet of that star.

He neared it and found himself outside the gaseous envelope that surrounded the planet. Here again he paused, bewildered, to analyze and try to understand the amazing thing his perceptions told him lay below.

There were entities there below him, millions, even billions, of them. More in number on this tiny sphere than in the entire plane from which he had come. But these beings were each *imprisoned in a finite bit of matter*.

What cosmic cataclysm, what interplanar warp, could have led to such an impossible thing? Were these entities from one of the myriad consciousness-planes who, in some unknown manner and for some unknown reason, had brought about this unthinkable mesalliance of consciousness and matter?

He tried to concentrate his percep-

tion on a single entity, but the myriad emanations of thought from the planet's surface were too many and confusing to let him do so.

He descended toward the solid surface of the sphere, penetrating its outer gasses. He realized he would need to come near one of the beings in order to tune out, as it were, the jumbled confusion of the thoughts of the many.

The gas thickened as he descended. It seemed strangely agitated as though by intermittent but frequent concussions. Had not sound and hearing been things foreign to an incorporeal entity, the Stranger might have recognized the sound-waves of explosions.

The mass of smoke he recognized as a modification or pollution of the gas he had first encountered. To a creature who perceived without sight it was neither more nor less opaque than the purer air above.

He encountered solidity. That, of course, was no barrier to his progress, but he perceived now that he was on a vertical plane roughly coincidental with the surface of solidity, and that from that plane, on all sides of him, came the confused and mystifying emanations of consciousness.

ONE SUCH source was very near.

Shielding his own thoughts, the Stranger moved closer. The consciousness-emanations of the nearby entity were clear now—and yet not clear.

He did not know that their confusion was due to the fact that agonizing pain muddled or blanked out everything but itself. Pain, possible only to an alliance of mind and matter, was utterly inconceivable to the Stranger.

He went closer, encountering solidity again. This time it was a different type of surface. Outside, it was wet with something thick and sticky. Below that, a flexible layer covered a less flexible layer. Beyond that, soft

and strange matter, queerly convoluted.

He was nearer the source of the incomprehensible consciousness emanations now, but oddly they were becoming fainter. They did not seem to come from a fixed point, but from many points upon the convolutions of softness.

He moved slowly, striving for understanding of the strange phenomenon. The matter itself was different, once he had penetrated it. It was made up of cells and there was a fluid that moved among them.

Then, with awful suddenness, there was a convulsive movement of parts of the strange matter, a sudden flare of the un-understandable pain-consciousness emanation—and utter blankness. Simply, the entity that he had been studying was *gone*. It had not moved, but it had vanished utterly.

The Stranger was bewildered. This was the most astonishing thing he had yet encountered on this unique planet of the matter-mind mes-alliance. Death—deepest mystery to beings who have seen it often—was deeper mystery to one who had never conceived as possible the end of an entity.

But, more startling still, at the instant of the extinguishment of that incoherent consciousness, the Stranger had felt a sudden force, a pull. He had been shifted slightly in space, *sucked into a vortex*—as air is sucked into a sudden vacuum.

He tried to move, first in space and then in time, and could not do so. He was trapped, imprisoned in this incomprehensible thing he had entered in search of the alien entity! He, a being of thought, had in some way become inextricably entangled with physical matter.

He felt no fear, for such emotion was unknown to him. Instead, the Stranger began a calm examination of his predicament. Throwing his per-

ception-field out more widely, alternately expanding and contracting it, he began to study the nature of the thing in which he was held prisoner.

It was a grotesquely shaped thing, basically an oval cylinder. From one corner, as it were, projected a long jointed extension. There were two longer projections at the other end of the cylinder.

Strangest of all was the ovoid thing at the end of a short flexible column. It was inside this ovoid, near the top, that the focus of his consciousness was now fixed.

He began to study and explore his prison, but could not begin, as yet, to understand the purpose of the weird and complex nerves, tubes and organs.

Then he felt the emanations of other entities nearby, and threw still wider the field of his perceptions. His wonder grew.

Men were crawling forward across the battlefield, passing the shattered body of Johnny Dix. The Stranger studied them and began, dimly, to understand. He saw now that this body he was in was roughly similar to theirs, but less complete. That such bodies could be *moved*, subject to many limitations, by the entities that dwelt within them, even as he now dwelt within this body.

Held prisoner to the surface of solidity of the planet, nevertheless these bodies could be moved in a vertical plane. He pulled his perceptions back to the body of Johnny Dix and began to probe for the secrets of inducing it to locomotion.

From his study of the things that crawled past him, the Stranger had sought and found certain concepts that were now helpful. He knew the projection with the five smaller projections was "arm". "Legs" meant the members at the other end. "Head" was the ovoid in which he was imprisoned.

These things moved, if he could discover how. He experimented. After a while a muscle in the arm twitched. From then on, he learned rapidly.

And when, presently, the body of Johnny Dix began to crawl slowly and awkwardly—on one arm and two shattered legs—in the direction the other crawling beings had taken, the Stranger didn't know that he was performing an impossible feat.

He didn't know that the body he caused to move was one which never should have done so. He didn't know that any competent doctor would not have hesitated to pronounce that body dead. Gangrene and decay were already setting in, but the Stranger's will made the stiffening muscles move despite them.

The mangled thing that had been Johnny Dix crawled on, jerkily, toward the ChiCom lines.

WONG LEE lay prone against the sloping side of the shell-hole. Above it projected only his steel helmet and the upper half of the goggles of his gas mask.

Through the hell of smoke and fire before him, he peered toward the American lines from which the counter-attack was coming. The shell-hole he occupied was slightly behind his own front lines, now under the barrage of American fire. With eight others, he had left shelter five hundred feet behind to reinforce an advance position. The eight others were dead, for shells had fallen like rain. Wong Lee, loyal though he was, had seen that he would be serving his leaders better by waiting here than by accepting certain death trying to make the last hundred feet.

He waited, peering into the smoke, wondering if anyone or anything could survive in the holocaust up ahead.

A dozen yards away, dimly through the smoke, he saw something coming toward him. Something that did not

seem quite human—although he could not yet see it clearly—had crawled through that hellish rain of steel, and still crawled slowly. Tattered shreds of an American uniform clung to it here and there.

Already he could make out that it wore no gas mask or helmet. Wong Lee gripped a gas grenade from the pile of equipment beside him and lobbed it high and straight. It fell true, scarcely a foot in front of the crawling thing. A white geyser of gas mushroomed up—a gas of which a single whiff caused instant death.

Wong Lee grinned a mirthless grin and told himself that that was that. The gasmaskless figure was as good as dead. Slowly the white gas dissipated itself into the smoky air.

Then Wong Lee gasped. The thing was still coming; it had crawled right through that white cloud of death. It was nearer now and he could see what had been its face. He saw too the shattered horror that had been its body and the impossible method of its forward progress.

A cold fear gripped his stomach. It did not occur to him, yet, to run. But he knew that he had to stop that thing before it reached him or he would go mad.

Forgetting, in his greater terror, the danger of falling shells, he jumped to his feet, pointed his heavy service automatic at the crawling monstrosity, now but ten feet distant, and pulled the trigger. Again and again and again. He saw the bullets strike.

He had not quite emptied the clip when he heard the scream of the coming shell. He tried to throw himself back into the shell-hole, just a little too late. He was off balance, falling backward when the shell struck. It struck and exploded just behind the thing that crawled. He heard the clang of a fragment of steel ricocheting off his helmet. Almost miraculously, he was otherwise unhit.

The impact on his helmet stunned him.

When consciousness returned, Wong Lee found himself lying quietly in the bottom of his shell-hole. At first he thought the battle had ceased or moved on. Then the drifting smoke over the rim of the crater and the constant shaking of the ground beneath him told him that it was not so. The battle continued; the shattered eardrums of Wong Lee brought him no auditory impressions of it.

Yet he *heard*. Not the thunder of battle, but a quiet, calm voice that seemed to be speaking within his own mind. It asked, dispassionately, "What are you?" It seemed to be speaking Chinese, but that made it no less bewildering. Strangest of all, it did not ask *who* he was, but *what*.

Wong Lee struggled to a sitting position and looked about him. He saw it lying there beside him, scant inches away.

It was a human head, or what had been one. With growing horror he saw that it was the head of the thing that had crawled toward him. The shell that had struck just behind it had blown it here, though without the body that had enabled it to crawl.

Well, it was dead now, all right.

*Or was it?*

Again, in the mind of Wong Lee, that quiet query, "What are you?" made itself heard. And suddenly, not knowing how he knew, Wong Lee was certain that the asker of that question was the severed, horribly mutilated head beside him in the shell-hole.

Wong Lee screamed. He tore off his gas mask as he scrambled to his feet and screamed again. He gained the top rim of the shell-hole and began to run.

He'd taken out ten paces when, almost at his feet, the thousand-pound demolition bomb struck and exploded. Soil and rock from the explosion of

the bomb rose high into the air and descended. The falling soil and rock filled completely most of the smaller shell-holes around the new crater.

In one of these, now buried under seven feet of soil, lay the mutilated head that had once been part of the body of Johnny Dix, now the unbreakable prison of an alien being. Helpless to leave his new bonds of matter, helpless to move at all in space or to move in time other than to drift with the time-stream of this plane, the Stranger—until an hour ago a being of pure thought—began calmly and systematically to study the possibilities and limitations of his new mode of existence.

\* \* \*

*Erasmus Findly, in his monumental "History of the Americas," devotes an entire volume to the dictator John Dix and the rise of imperialism in the United States immediately following the successful conclusion of the ChiCom War. But Findly, as do most modern historians, scouts the legendary character often given the figure of Dix.*

*"It is natural," he says, "that so sudden a rise from complete obscurity to complete and tyrannical control of the greatest government on the face of the earth should lead to such legends as those which the superstitious believe about Dix.*

*"It is undoubtedly true that Dix went through the ChiCom War as a buck private, without distinguishing himself. For this reason, possibly, he had most records of himself destroyed after his rise to power. Or possibly there was some mark on those records which made him wish them destroyed.*

*"But the legend that he was reported missing during the crucial*

*battle of that war—the Battle of the Panamints—and was not seen until the following spring, when the war was over, is probably untrue.*

*"According to the legend, in the spring of 1962 John Dix, naked and covered with dirt, walked up to a Panamint valley farmhouse, where he was given food and clothing. From there he proceeded to Los Angeles, then under reconstruction.*

*"Equally absurd are the legends of his invulnerability; the statements that dozens of times the bullets of assassins passed through his body without seeming even to cause him inconvenience.*

*"The fact that his enemies, the true patriots of America, got him at last is proof of the falseness of the invulnerability legend. And the crowning horror of that scene in the Rose Bowl, so vividly described by many contemporary witnesses, was undoubtedly a trap-door conjuring trick engineered by his enemies."*

\* \* \*

CALMLY and systematically, the Stranger had begun the study of the nature of his prison. With patience, he found the key.

Exploring, he tapped a memory in the head of Johnny Dix. A single episode suddenly became as vivid to him as though it were an experience of his own.

*He was on a small boat, passing an island in a harbor. Beside him was a man who seemed very tall. He knew the man was his father and that this was happening when he was seven years old and they had taken a trip to a place called New York. His father said, "That's Ellis Island, kid, where they let the immigrants in. Dam' foreigners; they're ruining this country. No chance any more for a*

*real American. Somebody ought to blow Europe off the map."*

Simple enough, but each thought of that memory brought connotations that explained it to the Stranger. He knew what a boat was, what and where Europe was, and what an American was. And he knew that America was the only good country on this planet; that all the other countries were made up of contemptible people—and that even in this country the only good ones were the white ones who had been here a long time.

He explored farther, found out many things that had bewildered him. He began to correlate these memories into a picture of the world in which he was now trapped. It was a strange, warped picture—although he had no way of learning that. It was a narrow ultra-nationalistic point of view, for one thing. And there were worse things than that.

He learned—and assimilated—all the hates and prejudices of buck private Johnny Dix, and they were many and violent. He knew nothing to the contrary of this strange world and so they became his hates and his prejudices, just as the memories became his memories.

Although he did not suspect it was so, the Stranger was finding his way into a narrower prison than his physical one; he was becoming trapped into the thoughts of a mind that had been neither strong nor straight.

There emerged a mentality which was a strange blend of the powerful mind of a strong entity and the narrow beliefs and prejudices of a Johnny Dix.

He saw the world through a dark, distorted lens. He saw that things must be done.

*"Those fatheads in Washington," he—or Johnny Dix—had said, "oughta be kicked out. Now if I was running this country—"*



Yes, the Stranger saw what things he must do to put this world right. This was a good country—parts of it—surrounded by bad countries, and the bad ones ought to be taught a lesson, if not exterminated. The yellows ought to be *all* killed, men, women and children. There was a black race that ought to be sent back to a place called Africa, where they belonged. And even among good white Americans, there were people who had more money than they should have, and it ought to be taken away from them and given to people like Johnny Dix. Yes, we needed a government that could tell people like that where to head in. And enough airplanes and A-bombs that we could tell the rest of the world where to head in, too.

But the Stranger saw, too, that buried as he was and in a piece of matter that was disintegrating even as he explored it, there was little chance of his accomplishing any of these important things.

So, avidly, he began to study the nature of matter. He could bring his perceptions down to the scale of atoms and molecules and study them. He saw that in the very soil about him he had the necessary materials, all of them, to reconstruct the body of Johnny Dix. By means of his memories of his first explorations of the incomplete body of Johnny Dix, as it had been when he first entered it, he began the study of organic chemistry.

He filled in his concept of the parts that had been missing from the body from the memories of Johnny Dix and began work.

Transmuting the chemicals of the soil was not a difficult problem. And heat was a mere matter of speeding up molecular action.

Slowly, new flesh grew upon the head of Johnny Dix; hair, eyes, and a neck began to form. It took time, but what was time to an immortal?

One evening in early spring of the following year, a naked but perfectly formed human figure clawed its way to the surface of soil that had been softened by molecular action to enable that figure to crawl out.

It lay quiet for a while, mastering the art of breathing air. Then, experimentally at first but with growing skill and confidence, it tried the use of various muscles and sensory organs.

THE GROUP of workmen on the Glendale Reconstruction Project looked around curiously as the man in the ill-fitting clothes stepped up on a packing crate and began to speak.

"Friends," he shouted, "how long are we going to tolerate—"

A uniformed policeman stepped up quickly. "Here now," he objected. "You can't do that. Even if you got a permit, these are work hours and you can't interrupt—"

"Are you satisfied, Officer, with the way things are run around here, and in Washington?"

The policeman looked up and his eyes locked with those of the man on the packing case. For a moment he felt as though an electric current had gone through his mind and body. And then he knew that this man had the right answers, that this man was a leader whom he'd follow. Anywhere.

"My name's John Dix," said the man on the box. "You ain't heard of me, but you'll be hearing of me from now on. I'm starting something, see? If you want in on the ground floor, take off that badge and throw it down. But keep your gun; it'll come in handy."

The policeman reached up for his badge and unfastened the pin.

THAT HAD been the start.

June 14, 1963, was the day of the end. In the morning there had been a heavy fog over Los Angeles—now

capital city of North America—but by mid-afternoon the sun was bright and the air balmy.

Robert Welson, leader of the little group of patriots who had failed, for some reason, to join the mass hysteria with which the people had backed John Dix, sat at a window of the new Panamera Building, overlooking the vast throng in the reconstructed Rose Bowl. On the floor under the window from which he looked lay a high-powered rifle with Mercer telescopic sights.

On the stage of the Bowl, John Dix, Dictator of North America, stood alone, although uniformed guards occupied all seats immediately around the stage and were scattered elsewhere in the audience. A microphone hung just overhead and a speaker system carried the dictator's voice to the farthest reaches of the Bowl, and beyond. Robert Welson and the others in the room with him could hear it distinctly.

"THE DAY HAS COME. WE ARE PREPARED. PEOPLE OF AMERICA, I CALL UPON YOU TO RISE IN YOUR WRATH AND STAMP OUT NOW AND FOREVER THE POWER OF THE EVIL COUNTRIES BEYOND THE SEAS."

Over the Bowl cheering rose, a mighty wave of sound.

Through it Robert Welson heard three sharp raps on the door of the room behind him. He crossed the room and opened the door. A tall man and a scrawny boy with a large head and great vacuous eyes came into the room.

"You brought the kid," said Welson. "What for? He can't—"

The tall man spoke. "You know Dix isn't human, Welson. You know how much good our bullets have done before! Why, in Pittsburgh, I saw *them* hit him. But this clairvoyant

kid here—or maybe it's telepathy or something and not clairvoyance and I don't know or care—has got a line on him somehow. The first time the kid ever saw him he went into a fit. We can't fight Dix without knowing what we're fighting, can we?"

Welson shrugged. "Maybe. You play with that. I'm going to keep on trying steel-jacketed lead."

He drew a deep breath and walked again to the window. He knelt before it on one knee and raised the sash. His left hand reached for the rifle.

He said, "Here goes. Maybe if we get *enough* lead in him—"

\* \* \*

*McLaughlin, author of the most famous biography of John Dix; while avoiding direct acceptance of any of the legends which have filled many other books, concedes the mystical aspect of Dix's rise to power.*

"It is indeed strange," he writes, "that immediately, suddenly, after his assassination, the wave of insanity which had engulfed the United States disappeared abruptly and completely. Had not the few true patriots who failed to follow his lead succeeded, the history of the world during the last part of the Twentieth Century would have been a story of bloody carnage unparalleled in history:

"*Extermination, or ruthless suppression, would have been the lot of every country which he could have conquered—and there is little doubt, in view of the superior armaments he had, that the ravage would have been far-flung. He might even have conquered the world. Although, of course, America itself would ultimately have suffered most.*

*"To say that John Dix was a*

madman can hardly explain the extent of his power over the people of his own country. Almost it is possible to credit the current superstition of his superhuman powers. But if he was a superman, he was a warped superman.

"It was almost as though an ignorant, prejudiced, opinionated man, narrow-minded in every way, had miraculously been given the power to sway most of the population, able to impress his narrow hatreds upon all—or almost of all—who listened. The few who were immune, battling terrific odds, saved the world from Armageddon.

"The exact manner of his death remains, after all this time, shrouded in mystery. Whether he was killed by a new weapon—destroyed after it had accomplished its purpose—or whether the monstrous thing seen by the throngs in the Bowl was a mere illusion, the trick of a prestidigitator extraordinary, will never be certainly known."

\* \* \*

THE MUZZLE of the rifle rested on the ledge of the window. Robert Welton steadied it and peered through the telescopic sights. His finger rested against the trigger.

The voice of the Dictator boomed through the speakers. "OUR DAY OF DESTINY—" Sentence incompleted, he paused, leaning forward across the table behind which he stood. The audience was hushed, awaiting completion of the sentence before the cheering would rise again.

The tall man standing behind Robert Welton put an urgent hand on Welton's shoulder. "Don't shoot yet," he whispered. "Something's happening. Look at the kid, the clairvoyant."

Welton turned.

He saw that the scrawny boy had

fallen back into a chair, his muscles rigid. His eyes were closed, his face twisted. His lips writhed as he spoke:

"They're there. Near him. Like two shining points of light, only you can't see them. But there is a point like them—inside John Dix's head!

"Talking. They're talking to him, the two points of light like his point of light. Only not words. But I can get what they're saying, even if it isn't words. One of them asks, 'Why are you here? You seem strange. As though a lesser being had—' I can't understand that part of it; there aren't any words I know that would say it.

"The thing, the point, inside Dix's head is answering. It says, 'I'm trapped here. The matter holds me. The matter and the memories in it hold me prisoner. Can you help me free?'

"They answer that they will try. They will all three concentrate together. The combined force of the three of them will free him from his prison. They're trying—"

Something strange was happening. The Dictator was still silent, still leaning forward across the table. Minutes had passed, and he had not moved, had not completed the sentence he had started.

Robert Welton turned from the kid back to the window again. To see more clearly, he looked through the telescopic sights of the rifle, but his finger wasn't on the trigger now. Maybe the half-witted kid really had something on the ball. The dictator had never paused that long before.

Behind him the kid sang out "Free!" as though it were a triumphal thought repeated from somewhere in his brain. And, although the kid couldn't see out of the window from where he sat, that cry came simultaneously with whatever it was that happened to John Dix.

Welson gasped, but the sound was lost in the sudden screams and shrieks from the audience in the Bowl.

With awful suddenness the body of the Dictator vanished before their eyes, vanished into a thin white mist that disappeared into the air as his

empty clothing fell to the floor.

But the hideous thing that fell from vanished shoulders and lay in plain sight on the table did not disintegrate at once. It was a hairless, eyeless, almost fleshless, rotting thing that once had been a head.

## The Outlaw Cell . .

By JON BARRY

**M**EDICAL men in cooperation with the government of Canada and the United States have compiled a half-hour motion picture film which promises to be the first of many similar ones. These films of the future will be intelligent productions which will enable the layman or the non-professional to see exactly how technicians tackle a difficult problem, and will let the average man know where science stands in a given field.

The single present film concerns medicine's most potent enemy—cancer! The film shows how cancers begin—but not why—what medicine does to combat the disease and what success has presently been attained.

You are shown peering into the microscope, the electron microscope, specimens of the disease. Drawings and sketches clarify the process of how the cancerous growths rob the healthy cells of nutriment and oxygen. The gradual spread of the disease through the bloodstream by run-away cancer cells is shown. The complete course of the evil disease is charted in detail.

The spectator is shown scientists at work, listens to their shop-talk, watches chemical and x-ray experiments, sees how drugs and radioactives are used. In short a complete analysis of the state of the disease as far as its known today, is given.

But the question "why?" naturally is left unanswered. Never-the-less the promise is there and it is only a matter of time before scientists manage to put the finger on the killer.

More and more educational experts are turning to the film as a medium of teaching. This coupled with television will in the not distant future, make it possible for a man to know something about everything. When you stop to think about it, there is no place on Earth, nor any technical operation that can't be effectively demonstrated by our modern communication methods.

Eventually the faces of the planets and the Moon will appear in everyone's living room. It is only a question of time. If this keeps up, Man will develop into simply an eye and a arm for taking in all his knowledge!

## "When It Rains"

By L. A. BURT

**O**NE OF THE hottest things on the technological griddle is the matter of artificial rain-making. All you have to do is pick up the New York newspapers to see how important this matter is in the public eye and how closely developments in it are being followed.

Since scientists have discovered that it is possible to cause water precipitation from suitably saturated air by "seeding" with crystals of dry ice, or various iodides, a million experimentees are trying to get into the act with typical American enthusiasm. But like all new technological initiations, this one is slow in developing. The mechanism of precipitation is complex, though outwardly simple, and there is a world of difference between a chamber in a laboratory and the vast bowl of the sky.

Nevertheless, it is perfectly apparent that eventually this phase of weather making is going to come under man-made control. Continual and pressing needs for water in dry areas, great military potentialities, and the lure of the unknown combine to make rain-research particularly intriguing. Not only are scientists working on the matter but a host of lawyers is involved in ascertaining who owns what. If Joe Blow causes a cloud-burst near Plotchacaloosa, inundating its inhabitants, who is responsible if he has been asked to do so by bone-dry Motchacaloosa? This ticklish matter is really no joke.

But before you eat your rabbit you have to catch him. In any vast, large-scale experiments so far performed, no one is actually certain that manual interference has caused the resulting (or coincidental) rain.

The world wide automatic weather-conditioning of the science-fiction novel is not yet with us nor does it appear likely in the near future. But certainly the fumbling first steps have been taken. We may be as surprised as the atomic energy or the rocket skeptics who predicted that it would be a long, long time...

Men have effectively conquered world-wide communications, have nearly conquered world-wide transportation, but there are still a few leagues to go before they mail weather. But don't bet that they won't. Nothing is certain these days, but death and...

# The SCREAMING SHAPES

*By Franklin Gregory*

Was it the filth from a hundred factories  
that spawned these hideous, formless killers?

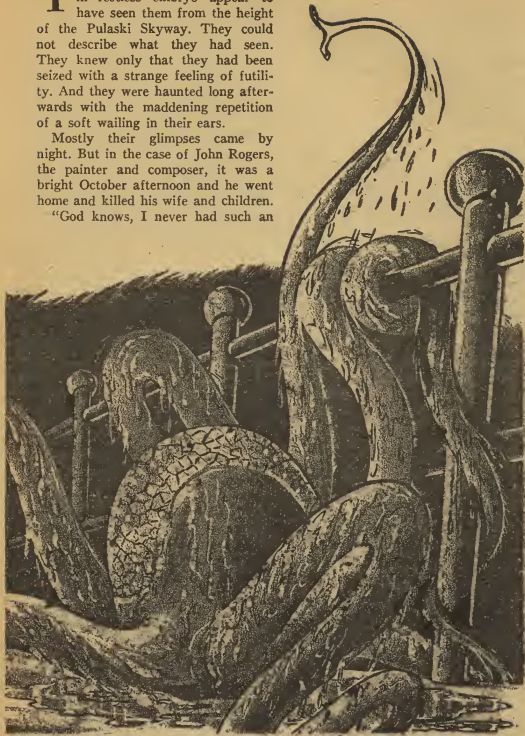


The passenger tried frantically to wrest the wheel from the hypnotized driver...

THOSE WHO first saw them in restless embryo appear to have seen them from the height of the Pulaski Skyway. They could not describe what they had seen. They knew only that they had been seized with a strange feeling of futility. And they were haunted long afterwards with the maddening repetition of a soft wailing in their ears.

Mostly their glimpses came by night. But in the case of John Rogers, the painter and composer, it was a bright October afternoon and he went home and killed his wife and children.

"God knows, I never had such an





intention," he said at his trial.

He had been driving along the Skyway in heavy traffic when he idly glanced down into the dark and oily waters of the Hackensack River two hundred feet below. And it was then, he said, that the compulsion came upon him.

"I couldn't bear to think of them suffering such horrors," he said.

He did not amplify this, nor did counsel ask him to. He spoke tonelessly, as if he knew that words were vain. And his eyes were terribly dilated just as they had been when the Montclair police found him in his home staring wonderingly at the twisted bodies of the wife and son and daughter he had strangled. And just as his eyes had remained when he was removed to the death house in the State Prison at Trenton.

Only Buckham, who had interviewed him, suspected how desperately he wished to live.

"I want to find out what I saw," Rogers said. And he shook his head quickly as if trying to rid his ears of the distracting sound that still clung there.

Later, Buckham found the prison officials curiously reluctant to discuss the condemned's last days in his cell.

"What the hell, Zenas, he's dead, isn't he?" the warden said. "Isn't it enough that he's dead?"

He spoke as if he were relieved to get rid of Rogers—which he was. And not for any sound reason, but only because the sight of the man had disconcerted him so.

Buckham's left eyelid lowered in a look that always seemed to make public officials vaguely uncomfortable. They could never tell just what Buckham knew and how much.

"Dead?" Buckham repeated. "Well, now, of course if you mean by death—"

Warden Haynes had no intention of getting involved in one of Buckham's metaphysical discussions.

"Oh, go ahead," he grumbled. "Talk to anybody you want to."

AS IT TURNED out, John Rogers had been pretty much left to himself those last days. Hogan, the night turnkey, said:

"I'd poke my light on him now and again when I'd come by and he'd be layin' there on his cot, starin' up at the ceilin'. He'd turn his head like he saw something crawlin' along the ceilin'. There wasn't nothin' there, but godamighty it sure gimme the creeps."

And Markle, the day turnkey, said: "He left some drawings on the wall. You know—in chalk. Not bad drawings, either, though Lord knows what they're meant to be. I looked at 'em once and whether it was them that made me sick to my stomach or something I ate, I don't know. But I took no second look. No—nobody's been in there since..."

He fumbled with the key while inserting it in the lock of the steel door. And when the door swung open, he found it convenient to go off somewhere on an errand. Buckham learned why when he saw what Rogers had drawn. It was with the greatest of self control that he could focus his camera. Not even the strangeness of the execution had prepared him for this!

Buckham had seen that, of course—just as he had reported every New Jersey execution for eleven years. Mostly, they followed a pattern. Each was the closing chapter of a big crime story. But always there was enough variation in detail to challenge the interest of such a connoisseur as Buckham, who kept copious notes and meant sometime to write a book about the deaths he had seen. The variations in the electrocution of John



Rogers seemed so extreme as to convince him that here was not the end of a story, but the beginning.

Rogers' eyes were still wide with that spectral, questioning stare when he was led into the execution chamber. He walked steadily; then, just before he was seated in the chair, he recognized Buckham and smiled faintly.

Buckham had a feeling that he was still smiling and that his eyes were still staring even after the hood dropped over his head. And once, the shrouded head shook quickly as if still trying to shake off some sonic annoyance.

Buckham always watched the hands. He believed that the hands told much about the last thoughts of a condemned man when you could no longer see his face. Some hands were wet with sweat; some, limp with terror; some were normally relaxed, and some clutched the chair arms as if holding desperately onto life. Always, after the current surged through the body, the hands clenched and remained so.

But as the executioner moved toward the control board, Rogers' hands were different from any Buckham had ever seen. They were lifted slightly, the fingers spread out as if feeling for something in the dark. Suddenly, from behind the hood, came Rogers' voice, chill and startling in its intensity:

"I can't find it! God knows I've tried—but I can't find it. Mr. Buckham, will you try to find it?"

The moaning hum of the electric power came on then. And during the moments before the prison surgeon pronounced death, Buckham became aware of the two great variations:

The hands never clenched, but still remained spread out as if feeling for something, and—there was none of the acrid smell of burning flesh.

LATER, there was the haunting testimony of Moriarity, the mortician who had embalmed the body. A drunkard, this Moriarity. Buckham meant some day to do an essay on the causes of alcoholism among undertakers.

"The eyelids," Moriarity said slowly, looking into his glass, "wouldn't shut. I closed them...and when I turned around, they were open again. And the eyes! Great God, they were crazy to look at! Searching, you know, and devilishly intelligent. And when I finally sewed them shut, I felt like a murderer myself."

"You ought to lay off that stuff," Buckham said, glancing with disapproval at the bottle. But he did not speak skeptically. Moriarity concentrated on his glass.

"My God, Zenas!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Do you think he was really dead?"

Buckham grunted.

"If *you* don't know, who would?"

Driving back to Newark that evening, Buckham half wished that he, like Moriarity, were a drinking man. It seemed such an easy way to solve one's troubles. Already he was beginning to feel a fierce resentment against John Rogers—much like that which he had seen on the faces of judge and jurors and jailers. It is a phenomenon of nature that people do not like what they cannot understand; and Buckham considered it grossly unfair for John Rogers to die as he had, using his dying breath to involve Buckham in his own disastrous problem.

"I can't find it! Mr. Buckham, will you try to find it?"

Find *what*, for God's sake? What decent man could have made such a request from the door of the tomb? But could any decent man ignore such a plea?

Well—Buckham hadn't. Already he had talked to Haynes and Hogan and Markle and Moriarity. And he had stood in Rogers' cell, aghast at how the man had spent his last days on earth abusing his God-given talents. The very sight of what Rogers had chalked on the cell wall infected him like a loathsome disease—and of the dirgeful notes which Rogers the musician had marked beside what Rogers the painter had drawn, Buckham could only describe them in the words of Pope as chromatic tortures. They moaned in his ears.

On the seat beside him lay the leather-cased Leica with the exposed film in it, and for a moment Buckham had an impulse to fling the equipment away. Just as he was impelled, too, to turn in the road and drive as far in the other direction as the land would take him.

That he did not surrender to this impulse was not only because of his strength of character, but because he knew too well that wherever he went he would still see Rogers' lean fingers reaching out, searching; and he would still see the driving stare of those questioning eyes. Failing to find an answer by himself, the man had achieved a horrid immortality by fastening his task on Buckham. And Buckham could see the eyes now, large, brilliant, compelling, racing toward him out of the night...

Only in time he swerved to avoid collision with the truck.

In Newark, Buckham stopped once—at the *Eagle's* art department to ask Ben Cutler, the head photographer, to develop and print up his film. Then he went to his hotel and up to his rooms. When he had unlocked and swung open the door, two things were happening. The telephone was ringing and a slim, pretty blonde was in the act of answering it.

"How," he asked, "in the devil did

you get in here?"

Daisy Lovell ran to him and threw her warm, white arms around his neck.

"Magic," she cooed. "Miss me, hon?"

A CURIOUS character, this Zenas Buckham. A scarecrow of a man, lean-faced, with deep-set, brooding eyes and dark red, rebellious hair; a man careless of his dress and awkward of movement. No movie idol at all, and yet possessor of a rough masculinity that made feminine hearts beat faster.

A dozen years of newspapering had left him with little other ambition than the day-by-day reporting of events from such out-of-the-way police headquarters as those of Kearny and Harrison and East Newark and Arlington and Secaucus. Slum towns and factory towns, they circle the Jersey Meadows, that great, irregular tract of marshland that stretches between the converging Passaic River on the west and the Hackensack on the east.

From the Meadows you can see the skyscrapers of Manhattan rising over the Hudson Palisades beyond Weehawken and Hoboken and Jersey City. Long trains snake across the Meadows, bearing goods and people into the canyons which are formed by the skyscrapers. And here and there sprawling factories which make paints and lacquers and tar and roofing spew their waste into the rivers and creeks until the waters are covered with the green and yellow and red culms of poisonous pigments.

From the height of the Pulaski Skyway, which cuts across the Meadows with its miles-long viaducts of flying steel, the view by night is eerie and compelling. The waste gases of oil refineries burn atop the stacks like torches of giants. The red glare

from the blast furnaces is reflected on the low clouds. And in the south, from the gloom of Newark Bay, sound the hollow whistles of tug boats and tankers.

Only a few poorly-lighted roads meander across the Meadows. And smog is frequent. Laden with sulphurous fumes from the smelters, it spreads out in a dense, yellow mist over the mud flats and marsh grasses. It smarts the eyes and nose. And when there is no smog, there is thick smoke and clouds of mineral dust which enter the lungs and cause silicosis.

So the air and the water and the land were poisoned. And it was Buckham's world, which he knew like few other men. And from the windows of his rooms, he could look out over the Passaic and across the Meadows.

It was not the Meadows, however, with which Buckham at the moment was concerned. Disengaging himself from Daisy's arms, he glanced about the apartment. Her jaunty hat rested on a table and through the far door he could see her suitcase open on the bed, exhibiting most indecently a collection of frilly underthings.

Buckham blinked. Daisy's pert face looked up at him.

"I got evicted," she said.

"Oh," Buckham replied.

"And I didn't have anywhere else to go," she continued.

"Oh," said Buckham.

It mustn't be supposed that Buckham minded having young ladies in his rooms, but he liked to be able to control the situation. And his knowledge of Daisy Lovell told him that he was not sure of his ability to control the situation here.

"And d'ya think your city editor would approve?" Buckham asked.

"Damn my city editor," said Daisy.

"I suppose," Buckham said, "I could move into the 'Y' until you find

another apartment."

"Silly! I can sleep on the couch."

"Well—" said Buckham.

THE PHONE rang again. Buckham crossed the room, sat down and picked it up.

"Yes. Buckham talking."

Daisy curled up on Buckham's lap, nestling her ear close to the instrument so she could hear, too.

"Listen, you old ghoul! What's this I hear about John Rogers making a last crack to you just before he fried?"

Buckham smiled as he recognized the voice of Hap Ladner, the State Police lieutenant who had been in charge of the Rogers investigation. Daisy pouted and made eyes.

"Ah, now," Buckham said, "you know I'd interviewed him, and—"

"What was it he couldn't find?" Ladner demanded.

"Just—a reason." Buckham tried to push Daisy's face away.

"A reason?" shouted Ladner. "A reason for what?"

"Why he killed his wife and kids," Buckham said.

"But why *you*?"

"Because I knew him, I suppose. And because I know the Meadows."

There was a pause, then Ladner said slowly:

"I remember...he said something about seeing something in the Meadows, something that brought on the compulsion, but he couldn't say what." Suddenly he broke off. "Oh, hell!" he exclaimed.

Buckham listened. In the background, he could hear the crisp voice of a police radio announcer.

"Zenast! It's a bad crack-up, Zenast! Bus on fire. Communipaw Avenue at the drawbridge over the Hackensack. Can you see anything from up there, Zenast?"

Buckham sprang up so suddenly

that he nearly spilled Daisy to the floor. He peered through the window at the night panorama which spread out below for miles. He could see a lighted tube train of the Hudson & Manhattan crawling across the flats toward Jersey City. To the east he could see the lights of traffic moving along the dim, high span of the Skyway. A tug boat, pulling a string of barges, had just passed under the span outward bound for the darkness of Newark Bay. And then, just beyond and below the Skyway, where a strand of ground lights charted the course of Communipaw Avenue he could see a wavering glare.

The glare brightened in a great white flash that lit up the sky, then faded.

"Something just blew up," he said into the phone.

"Christ!" exclaimed Ladner. "You going down?"

"Right away."

"See you," Ladner said, and rang off.

"Oh, goody!" cried Daisy. "I'm going, too!"

IT WAS a shocking scene that confronted Daisy and Buckham when they reached the drawbridge. A big, gray, west-bound Public Service bus, jammed with passengers, had swerved from its inside lane into the path of a gasoline truck, and turned over but a few yards short of the bridge control house. In the blast-studded inferno that followed only a few passengers at the front of the bus had been able to climb to safety through the gaping, up-ended front door.

Through the heat-cracked windows of the charred and smouldering wreckage, the two reporters could see the blackened bodies of men, women and children in all the awkward positions of sudden death. Already a rescue crew was at work. An ambulance had

arrived and distant sirens signaled the approach of others.

Daisy was suddenly a whirlwind of reportorial efficiency. Pencil and notebook in hand, she was here, there and everywhere. But she was back at Buckham's side when a small man seized his arm. He was a hatless and begrimed small man. His face was scratched and bleeding and the right sleeve of his coat was ripped off, exposing a long, shallow cut from wrist to elbow.

"The driver!" he said. "He's down there."

He flung out his injured arm in the direction of the river. Buckham looked down into the dark waters. The tide was in and it was not far from the floor of the bridge to the water level. A short distance upstream the tug and its barges had stopped in mid-channel to wait for the bridge to open. Its lights were reflected crazily in the oily waters and on the foredeck a group of men stood, gesticulating excitedly. They seemed to be pointing to something half way between the tug and the far bank. Buckham and Daisy strained their eyes. Something definitely was threshing about. A searchlight came on from the tug and its white spear glided across the water and came to rest on the spot.

Buckham held his breath in horror.

It was a claw-like, flesh-colored formless, churning thing and the meaty object it held might have been a human body.

As quickly as he saw it, it vanished with its prey beneath the surface. And then there drifted across the water to his ears a low and mournful wailing, so tentative that when it was gone Buckham was unsure whether he had heard anything or was merely sensing a familiar echo from the death cell of John Rogers.

Turning to the man beside him, he found that tall, husky Hap Ladner

had joined them. And Ladner, his face graven, was still gazing out over the river.

"You saw it, too, Laddie? You heard it?"

Ladner made no reply. A man schooled in the new-day police science which denies even the evidence of the senses unless confirmed by test tube and micrometer, he was unwilling to believe his own eyes and ears.

IT WAS then that Ladner saw Daisy, and nodded—either in recognition or agreement. Her own expression was one of disbelief. The stranger was pawing at Buckham's arm. Buckham looked at him.

"You were in there?" he asked, indicating the bus.

"Yes, I was in there." The man spoke softly. "In the front seat, right behind the driver." He added: "My name's Smallens." And then Buckham noted a curious thing: the little man's eyes were wide and questioning, much as John Rogers' had been.

"That thing—you saw it? Out there?" the little man asked.

Buckham nodded.

"But it was here, you see," the man said, still softly as though he feared someone might overhear him. "Here—climbing up the side of the bridge house, moving up out of the water, and reaching out toward us..."

Ladner spoke sharply.

"What happened? Did the driver lose control?"

"Oh, no—no. I'd been speaking to the driver. I know you aren't supposed to...not when he's driving. But I was. And so I was leaning forward and we both saw it at once. And the driver deliberately steered toward it."

Ladner frowned.

"Steered toward what?"

The man appeared surprised at the

question.

"Why," he said, "at what was there, of course."

Ladner looked suspiciously into the man's face. Buckham glanced at Daisy.

"Then—?" prompted Buckham.

"At the first bump, he was thrown out—pulled out or thrown over—over the rail. I don't really know which. Because it was then I got this," he indicated his ripped arm, "and it seemed to me it came in after me. But I don't really know. And then we turned over."

"And when you crawled out—?" asked Buckham.

"It was sliding back into the river."

Ladner said gruffly:

"There's a doctor over there with that ambulance. Better get that arm fixed up."

And when the man had dazedly walked away, Ladner said: "Much good a nut like that will do us."

The last embers were out now and the firemen were removing the bodies. At both ends of the bridge, policemen were re-routing traffic. News photographers were taking flashlight pictures and more reporters were arriving. A light burned in the little bridge house and Buckham glanced in.

"Laddie!" he exclaimed.

The bridge tender, an old, gray-headed man, still sat at the controls, one hand frozen to a switch. His eyes were open and staring—not at the bus wreckage a few yards away, but in the opposite direction out the upstream window.

"Laddie!" Buckham called sharply. "He's dead!"

BUCKHAM did not sleep well when, just before dawn, he finally crawled into bed. He had worked long and hard cleaning up the story and now the last name, age, address

and circumstance had been phoned in to the city room for the rewriter to handle. Lying there in the dark, he could visualize the florid headlines. And there would be the body of the story with its who, where, when, why, what and how.

These were the facts. But what were facts? Only anemic words, coined by men to hide their ignorance. He had seen and heard down there in the river something so elemental that no words of man could define it; something that he had not dared even hint of to the caustic-tongued, cynical man who sat in the city editor's chair at the *Eagle*.

"What the hell, Zenas? You losing your grip?"

It was not a question that a man still in his early thirties would like to hear. Good newspaper jobs were scarce, and moreover Buckham had never been the thrifty sort. The same awkward charm which he exercised over women had long proved the undoing of his pocketbook; and, since Daisy entered his life, he was even less affluent. For Daisy, to put it mildly, liked to have money spent on her.

Through the open door he could see, by the soft moonlight that filtered through the window, Daisy curled up on the couch. She had insisted on the couch, though he had offered her the bed. He had a sudden and very accountable desire to go in there and take her in his arms. Something cozy about having a woman around the place, he reflected. He'd half a mind to marry her—which was probably, he thought cynically, what she'd figured on in coming to him.

She slept as peacefully as a kitten, as though what had happened down there on the Hackensack River was just as commonplace as anything else that she ran into every day as a reporter for the opposition paper. Her

firm breasts, which looked so well in sweaters and even better, Buckham was now able to observe, in a chiffon nightgown, rose and fell evenly in the measure of young and healthy sleep. But then, Buckham considered, she hadn't followed the John Rogers case—and she hadn't seen John Rogers die. . . .

He had seen John Rogers die. And he'd seen other things. And when he finally dozed off, it was only to dream of tenuous, night-marish creatures wrestling about on the wall of John Rogers' cell. Out of this thrashing and wrestling, the questioning eyes of Rogers glowed. . . live eyes in the sockets of a corpse. . . and the corpse suddenly became blackened like the burned bodies he had seen in the bus.

It was nearly noon when a knock on the door started him up from one of these nightmares. It was a copy boy with the envelope of photographs from the *Eagle* art department. He was unwrapping them and Daisy was dressing in the bedroom, when Ladner dropped in.

"My God, Laddie! What's wrong?"

Ladner looked quickly at Buckham.

"Might better ask you," he grunted.

HE CROSSED the room and slumped wearily into a chair beside the window. He had been up all night, but there was more than exhaustion in his expression as he stared moodily out over the Meadows. A thin mist hung low over the two rivers, but the sun was shining and the red and yellow and green culms trapped in the backwaters behind the paint factories shone like jeweled plates.

Daisy came in from the bedroom and Ladner started up, coloring.

"Oh. I didn't mean to intrude."

"Don't be silly!" Daisy grinned.

"I'm merely doing a feature story about Zenas—you know, like one of

those New Yorker profiles. To do it right, I have to follow him around and see what makes him tick. Don't you think Zenas deserves a feature story about himself, Lieutenant?"

Ladner was too tired for banter. He looked at her dully, and she sat down and demurely crossed her hands in her lap. Finally, Ladner said:

"They found the driver."

Buckham misunderstood.

"His body?"

"No, no." Impatiently. "Alive." His nod summoned Buckham to the window. "Off there in the mud flats near that trestle. What would you say it is, a mile upstream from the drawbridge?"

He hesitated, and Buckham waited.

"Naked," Ladner said. "And raving mad."

Still Buckham waited. Ladner turned from the window. He was a big man who played half on the Princeton varsity; one of those college men who, more and more these days, are making police work their careers. His eyes were troubled.

"Shale is his name. I saw him and talked to him. What was the name of the little man who said he deliberately wrecked the bus—?"

"Smallens," said Daisy.

"That's it, Smallens. And Shale admits it. A raving lunatic—but now and again he'd return to his senses and yell: 'I did it on purpose! I had to.' And he said he had to save people from it. He said he was trying to smash it."

"It?" queried Buckham.

Ladner fixed Buckham with his stare. And each was remembering the man Smallens' answer to the same question when put by Ladner the night before: "At what was there, of course."

"He made four round trips a day from Newark to Times Square. And every trip for eight days, he said,

he'd seen that thing in the river. He said that he heard crazy sounds. And then, he said, when he saw it coiled around the bridge house he knew he must destroy it."

"And thirty-eight people were killed in the process," Buckham grunted. Ladner did not seem to hear.

"Just as Smallens said, Shale claims he was thrown out of the bus and over the rail. But something leaped up and caught him and dragged him down into the river. And it swam with him under the surface and sometimes on the surface. It was hot and stinking and it burned his skin, he said."

This, from a stolid lieutenant of the State Police, was an amazing story.

"And what do the others think at your barracks?" Buckham asked.

"That he's gone off his nut, of course, which as I've said he has. But you can imagine they're somewhat surprised at *this*."

LIEUTENANT Ladner took an envelope from his pocket and from the envelope he drew out an official State Police photograph. It was a revolting picture of a wild-eyed, naked man. Legs, thighs, rump, back, chest and arms were striped with long, narrow welts.

"Heavens!" cried Daisy. "It's as if he'd been lashed with a cat o' nine tails!"

Buckham looked at the picture thoughtfully, then with growing resentment.

"Dammit, Laddie! Why come to me with this?"

"Because," said Ladner slowly, "you're supposed to know more about the Meadows than anyone else—and maybe what lives there."

Buckham's laugh was short, ugly and slightly hysterical.

"You and John Rogers!" he grunt-



ed. "You wouldn't believe what I'd have to say, anyway." He spoke fiercely, giving way to a sudden, vicious desire to injure his friend. "Even your eyes are like John Rogers' this morning," he said.

Daisy stared at him. She had never seen Buckham in such a mood. Ladner turned wonderingly to a mirror. Then, still looking into the mirror, he said quietly:

"And have you seen your own, Zenas?"

Buckham felt ashamed.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I don't need to look at myself. I can feel it."

For a moment, both men looked at each other. And each knew that he was confronted by something so dead-ly that it would be suicide to fight it alone.

"Of course," said Ladner without much conviction, "it could be an octopus."

Buckham's negative was quick and emphatic.

"*Nothing* lives in those waters—you know that."

"Because of the waste from the factories?" asked Daisy.

"Yes. And besides, the cephalopoda are strictly salt water." He unwrapped his own envelope of pictures. "But *this* could have done it," he said, and whipped out an eight-by-ten enlargement.

Ladner's already large eyes bulged, and Daisy—for once giving way to a feminine emotion—recoiled and averted her head.

"Holy Moses! What's that?"

Buckham tapped the picture with his forefinger.

"Roger's version of what he saw," he replied slowly, "chalked on his cell wall. But he wasn't satisfied with this. He wanted a name for it—a definition—'Will you try to find it?' he asked me...as if putting a word on

something would help."

He uttered that last comment with contempt, then glanced at the picture again.

"Of course," he continued, "when we speak of the cephalopoda we mean the hundred and fifty-odd salt-water genera we know of today. But the extinct forms of Palaeozoic and Mesozoic times greatly outnumbered the living, and God only knows what shapes some of them took or what waters they lived in or how they fed and reproduced and grew. There was one big fellow, the Ammonite, with a shell five feet across..."

Ladner was incredulous.

"But good heavens, man! For something from millions of years back to wander into these times...it wouldn't be natural."

Buckham's smile was thin.

"Ah, I warned that you wouldn't believe what I'd have to say. And yet, here's evidence—John Rogers' last testament. Tell me, you two. Isn't there some semblance between this and what we saw last night?"

**R**ELUCTANTLY, Ladner re-studied the photo. Only with effort did Daisy give it a second glance.

"It was so damn quick," Ladner complained.

"I wasn't sure what I saw," Daisy murmured.

"But yes...this tentacle's something like. Good Lord! The man who drew that was inspired!"

"He was an artist," Buckham said simply. Then he returned to his former thought:

"Yet it's more than the cephalopoda we have to deal with. A man can look at an octopus or a squid and not lose his senses. But here—don't you see, Laddie? There's a confounded purpose about the thing. It's in the suggestion of movement. There's intelligence—blind intelligence, perhaps, but

fiendish and elemental. The kind that reaches out and fastens its terrible knowledge on a man against his will, revealing such horrors we've never dreamed of. Rogers felt its infection and killed his family to protect them from it. And Shale, a less sensitive man, felt it and took direct action against the thing itself—and went insane."

He started to reach for a book from a shelf and was suddenly attracted by a new and more alarming look in Ladner's expression. A weakness, he wondered?

"Of course," he said judiciously, quietly, "people of strong wills—like you and like you, Daisy, and like myself—are better equipped to resist. And also, we're forearmed because we are forewarned. Perhaps the whole tragedy of Rogers and Shale was the element of surprise. And the surprise stemmed from ignorance of it."

He had the book in his hands now and was thumbing through the pages.

"And what is it?" he asked, as he stopped at a passage. "I wonder if old Tom Blake didn't have some hint. You remember how he claimed he wrote his Prophetic Books from the dictation of spirits—often, even, against his will? Perhaps it was so, for what mortal imagination could conjure up such a picture of the Creation as this?

*"The shapes, screaming, fluttered vain;*

*Some combined into muscles and glands,*

*Some organs for craving and lust.  
Most remained on the tormented void—*

*Urizen's army of horrors."*

Buckham stepped to the window and again looked out across the Meadows where a yellow smog had now settled over marsh and factory and

stream.

He said abruptly:

"And what else was Blake's 'tormented void' but the chaos from which the old religions tell us that Cosmos was ordered? But the real question has to do with the shapes that were forced to remain out there in the void when the door of Cosmos closed against them. What else were they but soul-less half-matter, left-over refuse, unable to fit into an orderly world of muscle and bone and cell and gland?"

"You're almost beyond my depth," Ladner said.

"And mine, too, Laddie. But look out there! Look out at those great smelters and refineries and furnaces and crucibles! We've cut open the very guts of the world to feed them with oil and ore. We've changed the eternal elements and broken the atom itself. And what the machines don't consume, we toss off as waste to befoul the sea and the air. Then—couldn't it be, Laddie, that somehow in the process we've smashed down the door and recreated the old conditions so that these screaming shapes can come through again and feed and thrive?"

A strong man, Ladner, whose great physique was balanced with a level head. But Buckham and Daisy saw him shudder.

And Daisy was seeing a new side to Buckham's character. And now Buckham turned back from the book of old Tom Blake to the photographic enlargement of John Rogers' cell wall.

"D'ya read music, either of you?" he asked, pointing to the half dozen written measures below the drawing.

Daisy shook her head.

"I've never been one for that," said Ladner.

"Then listen—"

Softly at first, then a little louder, Buckham hummed the notes. Ladner

leaped across the room and tore the picture from him.

"My God, man, stop that!"

IT WAS THAT evening that the trek out of the Meadows began; at first so imperceptibly that even the observant Buckham, driving from one police station to another in the towns that surrounded the Meadows, saw nothing unusual in the night life of the factories.

By the next day whole departments were shut down and whispers of spreading strikes reached the city desks. And that made little sense. For many diverse factories were involved, and many diverse skills, and many unions.

Labor writers—noting that the big Underwood-Rand Calculating Machines Corporation was alone unaffected—wrote knowingly of mass ennui, a languor of spirits which they said could be as contagious as a bodily disease. But the close-mouthed workers, interviewed in their homes by the management men, gave no reason for their refusal to work. And soon even the management men themselves were leaving the Meadows.

Buckham, returning to his rooms from John Rogers' funeral at Montclair, found Daisy dressing to go out. Her city editor, she said, had told her to get onto the story.

"Down there? I won't let you," Buckham said.

Daisy bridled.

"It's an assignment," she said, "and I'm as much a reporter as you."

Buckham was caustic.

"I admire your devotion to duty, my dear—and I still forbid it."

She took a step toward him and put her arms around his neck and tilted her mouth up.

"And if I do—?"

"You'll lose your happy home."

"Then I'll sleep at someone else's."

"Daisy!"

His appearance of shock was deceptive. He was actually thinking of Rogers' funeral. There'd been only a few witnesses—a dozen or so of the morbidly curious who turn out for such occasions. And the undertaker. And his professional pallbearers. The latter somehow had mishandled the cheap wooden casket which the State Prison provided, and it plunged down into the grave, breaking open. And the head had popped out and Buckham was chilled to see one of John Rogers' sewn eyes...open and staring!

Daisy's pert face was very close. Was there that same look in her eyes, too? He felt suddenly sick, as if his intestines had knotted. His arms went around her and he held her tightly. His mouth lowered to the smooth skin of her throat and he kissed her and he talked to her in a husky whisper.

"I want you so much," he said. "I never knew how much I loved you. I can't lose you now. We'll go down—now—and get in the car...and drive as far away as we can."

Just as once before when this impulse was upon him, he knew that flight was not the answer. And so he made no further protest when Daisy said:

"Don't you understand, Bucky? I've got to find out what's there! And so do you. As long as we lived, this thing would hang onto our minds. And if you're right, honey—"

They left it at this: she could tour the factories, but only the factories, in her convertible. She was not to leave the main roads. And they'd meet at nine o'clock at the Glass Inn, that tiny, shack-like roadhouse on Communipaw Avenue near the Hackensack.

DAISY HAD no sooner left than Buckham was called into the office to take over the night city desk.

Two men had phoned in sick and two others were on out-of-town assignments. For a paper as understaffed as the *Eagle*, this was near-tragedy. Buckham could cover his own beat by phone, but he knew he could expect no help from the telegraph editor or his copyreader in an emergency. Young Fowler, the only reporter, would have to hold down Police Headquarters and try to cover the town from there. That left only Hanley, the photog, who was already late in getting in, and Beals, the lone rewrite man, who was already in the process of getting drunk.

Resentful, worried, nervous, Buckham rolled up his sleeves and waded into the copy left over from the day side. But he'd no more than begun when the phone rang. It was Fowler:

"Zenas? Did you know the bridge tenders are pulling out?"

Buckham tried to keep his voice even.

"How d'ya know?"

"The police teletype. They've left the bridges unmanned. Kearny firemen are down there but they don't know how to operate them. Is your window open? Can you hear the ships' whistles?"

"Wait—"

Buckham went to the window and raised it. It was a fine fall night and he could see, between two buildings, far off toward the Meadows where a necklace of lights marked the Skyway. As he listened, he could hear the impatient wailing of ships' whistles signalling vainly for the bridges to open along the lower reaches of the two rivers.

He returned to the phone.

"Try calling around to get the details," he ordered. And he started in once more on the pile of copy. But a few minutes later the AP state wire teletype beside the desk rang five urgent bells for "bulletin."

"Bayonne, N.J., Oct. 21—(AP)—"

The black typed lines in cap letters flowed rhythmically as Buckham read.

"The U. S. Coast Guard station here tonight at 7.18 picked up a frantic radio message from the White Line freighter Paterson which said the ship is trapped between two closed bridges in the lower Passaic. Lt. Cmdr. James Warren said communication broke off after the Paterson's operator radioed: 'For God's sake...crew jumping overboard...' Efforts to restore radio contact with the Paterson failed. The cutter Sark was dispatched to the scene."

Buckham's heart skipped a beat. He glanced at the Western Union clock on the wall. With a start, he saw that it was already 8 o'clock. His date with Daisy was for nine. Out of the question, of course; had been all along. He telephoned the Glass Inn and asked for Willie the bartender. A girlish giggle answered instead:

"Who? Willie Baines?" (Giggle)

"Will doesn't live here any more." (Giggle) "Will's gone off on a toot. Why don'tcha come on down, big boy? Free liquor. We're (hic) drinking it all up. Better hurry."

Buckham spoke slowly, precisely.

"Please," he insisted. "When Daisy Lovell arrives, will you tell her that Buckham..." He spelled it out: "B-for-boy, U-for-Ulysses, C-for-Charles...can't meet her. Tell her to call me at the *Newark Eagle*."

**H**E WAS sweating when he hung up. He wasn't sure he'd put his message across. He'd call again—at nine on the dot. Perhaps by then...

The teletype started up again:

"Add Bayonne..."

"The Coast Guard cutter Sark at 7.45 radioed it was unable to reach the Paterson because of an unmanned, closed bridge. A Coast Guard helicopter has been sent to investigate..."

Buckham thought: at least he could count on AP to cover the bridge story. He turned back to the copy on his desk, laboring to concentrate. Court story. Commission meeting. Sheriff's detective appointed. East Orange girl killed by hit-runner. Millburn Kiwanis Club to hold benefit dance.

Again the sharp five bells from the AP machine:

"Jersey City, Oct. 21 — (AP) — Motorists arriving at the west tollgate of the Holland Vehicular Tunnel from the Jersey City-Newark Turnpike reported tonight seeing a number of automobiles and trucks wrecked in ditches along the route. Most of the accidents, they told Port Authority tunnel police, were in the vicinity of the junction between that turnpike and the Belleville Turnpike in the North Jersey Meadows. They said they saw no sign of the drivers. Word was relayed to State Police who are investigating..."

Then:

"Second add bulletin Bayonne—

"At 8.05 Lt. Craig Bering, pilot of the Coast Guard helicopter, reported he was hovering low over the freighter Paterson. Lt. Cmdr. Warren said that Lt. Paterson reported by plane-ground radio that the ship was ablaze with lights but that none of the crew was visible.

"There was no deck space available for a landing and the helicopter hovered about 25 feet above the freighter's masts. Lt. Bering reported a curious movement in the water in the vicinity of the freighter although farther away the surface of the river was calm. Small craft which can sail under the closed bridge are being dispatched from nearby Elizabethport."

**B**UCKHAM looked dazedly about the small, dingy city room. The telegraph editor and his copyreader

were still wrangling with the night wire reports from the world's capitals. Beals, having sneaked out for a quickie, was walking unsteadily from the door toward his desk. Hanley, the photographer, had finally breezed in, a stogie sticking jauntily from his mouth.

"Look, fellows—Beals, for God's sake! Hell's breaking loose out there in the Meadows. Get out there fast! Here! Pick up Fowler, too, over at Police Headquarters."

As they went out, he called after them:

"Listen! If you run into Daisy Lovell of the *News*, ask her to call me."

He sat at his desk for a few minutes staring at the pile of copy. Suddenly he swore:

"On a night like this—tripe!" And he pushed the copy from him.

It was then that the phones began ringing.

People. People from everywhere: from East Orange, West Orange, South Orange, from Kearny, Arlington, Harrison, Hackensack, Secaucus, Hoboken, Union City.

"Is this the city editor? We heard..."

"Look, mister, the radio says..."

"What's that strange light I see from my window...?"

Asking the operator in the business office to screen the calls, Buckham walked into the editor's office and switched on the radio. A breathless male voice came up:

"This is your latest five minute round-up of the news, brought to you through the courtesy of..."

"Flash! New York. The Pennsylvania Railroad has just reported that its lift bridge on its main line over the Hackensack River has jammed. One report says that the bridge tender left it in an elevated position and disappeared. Trains from the south and

west are piling up one behind the other in the Jersey Meadows on the west side of the bridge and south and west-bound trains from Pennsylvania Station are blocked at the east end of the bridge. . . ."

Buckham went back to the teletype.

"Lead all Meadows.

"New York, Oct. 21 — (AP) — Thousands of railroad passengers, many automobiles and several steamships are stranded in the Jersey Meadows tonight in what appeared from all reports to be a series of strange coincidents affecting travel by rail, highway and water. Several persons are reported dead or missing.

"All factories in the area have closed, except one: the Underwood-Rand Calculating Machines plant. The mechanical bridges are inoperative. Hudson & Manhattan tube trains from Newark to Journal Square have halted, and a three-way investigation into the mysterious circumstances has been launched by State Police, the Coast Guard and local firemen. Road blocks are being set up. . . ."

**NINE O'CLOCK.** Buckham called the Glass Inn again. This time there was no answer. He phoned the Harrison State Police Barracks.

"Laddie?"

Ladner had just come in, was just leaving again.

"Zenas! I thought you'd be down here."

There was something in Ladner's tone, some tension, that Buckham did not like.

"I'm stuck in the office," he explained, "alone. Listen, Laddie! Daisy's down there somewhere. We were going to meet at the Glass Inn but I can't reach her there. There's no answer at all."

"The Glass Inn? My God, man! It's on fire."

"Laddie!"

Again Buckham's stomach knotted. Ladner was talking. There was that odd quality to his voice.

"Was anybody hurt, Laddie?"

"No—nobody."

Buckham was suddenly suspicious.

"Have you seen—?"

"It?" Ladner finished. "Them," he said flatly.

It was a moment before Buckham comprehended the full horror of this. Then he said, urgently:

"But you can find her. Get her out of there. Please, Laddie. She's driving a yellow convertible. Easy to spot, Laddie. Easy."

"I don't know, Zenas. There's so much. So many things."

His voice sounded very tired, apathetic, much as John Rogers' voice had sounded.

"But you've got your troopers. They're out there, aren't they? Can't you radio them?"

"I don't know, Ladner repeated. "They go out and they don't come back and we don't hear from them. I'll do what I can."

Turning miserably from the phone, Buckham had a desire to chuck the paper and rush down into the Meadows himself. At least he would be doing something, trying to find her—not sitting here, helpless, while the thing piled up.

Reason fought back. He was alone on the city side. Copy was now coming in over the AP state wire in a steady flow. It had to be edited, headed, set in type. The paper had to come out. And what could he do down there? Where would he look?

Old Hendlin, the telegraph editor, looked up from his corner at the other side of the room. His spectacled eyes peered out from under his green eyeshade.

"Big story breaking, Zenas?" he inquired mildly.

Buckham nearly choked. Where had the man been the last three hours? Buried in his lunatic reports from Washington and London and Paris and Moscow while the biggest story since the Creation was breaking next door!

But the very irony of the question served to steady Buckham's nerves; to give him a sense of perspective.

"Quite big, Henry," he replied quietly. "Our top story, Henny."

**IT WAS THEN** that the hopeful thought came to him: perhaps what happened to John Rogers and to Shale, the bus driver, and to the bridge tenders and the factory workers and the crew of the freighter Paterson—and was still happening to whomever was down there now—happened because they could not conceive of such a thing. Perhaps it was the fright and surprise of materialistic people when confronted with elemental phenomena.

Perhaps for Daisy and Ladner and himself, who had at least developed a hypothesis on which to work, the danger might not be so great. Perhaps Daisy and Ladner down there could look and keep on looking upon the thing and not succumb to the urge to destroy themselves as Rogers and Shale and the Paterson's crewmen had...

Still, was there not a breaking point; was there not a limit to resistance?

And it was growing. Ladner had used the word "them". And every report from the Meadows showed how it spread. He traced it on the big wall map of North Jersey. Rogers had first seen it in the Hackensack from the Skyway. The site of the bus crash was half a mile downstream from that. From there to where the Paterson lay in the Passaic River was nearly a mile to the west. And from there to where the trains were stalled and the cars

were ditched was nearly two miles.

And then Buckham had another hopeful thought. He had suggested to Daisy and Ladner that it was the poisonous wastes of the factories that nourished the horror. Was it not reasonable to suppose, now that the factories were closed, that the tides coming in and flowing out would carry the wastes into the sea? And that the fresh water flowing down from the watersheds would cleanse out the channels? And would not starvation then set in?

But how long would that take? Surely, there must be something that scientific man could do faster than nature.

The phone rang. It was Beals calling from a service station on the edge of the Meadows. Buckham started to put on his head set to take the story. Beals screamed through:

"It's awful, Zenas! Godawful! I can't describe it, Zenas!"

Click.

Buckham swore, and went again into the editor's office and this time he brought out the table radio and plugged it in on his desk. Listening, he tried to work at the same time.

"We are here in the heart of the Jersey Meadows, folks, in our two-way short-wave radio relay truck. We are parked on Belleville Turnpike across a wide stretch of Meadows from the main passenger line of the Pennsylvania Railroad. What we see is unimaginable.

"The long, red Pennsy trains are lined up one behind the other on both tracks on both sides of the Hackensack River. The bridge is jammed. The trains are lighted. But they are empty.

"They are empty because the people have fled from them—attracted by something heaven only knows what. Or running from something. They have fled into the marshes by the hundreds. Parked beside us are three floodlight



'trucks from the fire departments of Kearny and Jersey City. The lights are turned onto the marshland and we can see in the glare of light the people struggling toward us, trying to reach the road.

"There are men and women and babies in arms. The marsh grass is hip-high and we can see only the waists and shoulders and heads of the people. Some stumble and fall. Some seem to be pulled down. They try to struggle up. Some seem to be knocked down by something from behind them.

"A woman goes down. A woman in a red hat. She does not come up again. The man beside her does not even give her a look. He struggles on. And now he's down. We can see the terror of the faces of the people but we cannot see what is in the grass.

"A dozen firemen have just left the road and are running out to meet the people. They had almost reached them. But now they have stopped. They are beating at something in the grass.

"There is a vacant patch of grass off to the left where there are no people. The grass is rustling. It is not the breeze. The grass is rustling only in one place. It is as if something were crawling through the grass..."

**A** GAIN THE phone rang. His hand trembling, Buckham answered.

"Cy Moberly speaking from Irvington. State Police made a little numbers raid up here just now. Let me have a rewriteman."

Buckham fought to control his anger. Then:

"How in hell," he demanded, "can the State Troopers find the men or the time to make a fool raid like that on a night like this?"

He slammed the phone down, then sat back, breathless, his thoughts chaotic.

"Daisy," he whispered.

The vibration of the linotypes on

the floor below brought him to his senses. It was midnight now. Nearing edition time. Somehow he managed to write a general lead and patch on the AP copy. Actually it said little enough. There was a *when*, a *where*, a *who*—but no *what*, *why* or *how*.

Slowly, then, like dawn, the answer came to him. It crept into his thoughts, elusive at first, hardly discernible, almost escaping, then returning in greater force. It was born of a lone word uttered by Cy Moberly over the phone—and the word was *numbers*.

Swiftly he glanced through the AP copy to re-read a remembered paragraph.

"All factories in the area have closed, except one: the Underwood-Rand Calculating Machines plant."

He tossed the copy over to Hendlin. He thought: why should it be an exception?

There was only one answer. Whatever was out there had the devil's own fear of numbers.

Yes, that kept it at a distance. But to do the job right, to wade in against the thing, wouldn't there have to be form and order to the numbers? He reached for the phone and again called the Harrison Barracks. Ladner had just returned from a long tour of the Meadows. His voice sounded more tired than ever, more hopeless.

"I couldn't find her," he said.

"Laddie!" Buckham shouted. "I've got it, Laddie. I've got the answer. Please don't laugh at me, Laddie... it's numbers!"

"You aren't talking sense, Zenas."

"Yes I am. If it's what we think is down there—out of chaos, out of the void. Remember, Laddie?"

"Y-e-s," Ladner replied slowly, "I remember."

"And aren't form and numbers the enemy of chaos? Man, man! They're the highest achievement of the scien-

tific mind. Why *can't* they beat back the screaming shapes?"

"You're crazy."

"But we can try it, Laddie! We can try it! Stay there! Stay till I come. Half an hour, an hour. Please, Laddie."

"An hour? Good God!"

"Then drive over here for me. Please, Laddie. I'll try to be ready."

Again Buckham went into the editor's office. And this time he pulled out Volume 14, Libi to Mary, of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. It was a subject with which he had once been familiar—Magic Squares.

**H**ERE WAS purity of form; here was order. For the numbers in each square were arranged so that every column, every row, each of the two diagonals added up to a constant sum.

In the after time, Buckham would never know what influence if any he and his ideas had on the happenings of this mad night in the Jersey Meadows. He would never be able to conceive of such horrors. For when he would try to remember, he would not be able to recall what it was that he wished to remember. There were never to be again before him the haunting eyes of John Rogers, the reaching fingers. There would be an abyss, a darkness of the mind about these fine October days. And when he would try to discuss it with others, fumbling, hunting for words, they would look at him with surprise. Until the time would come when he would not speak of it at all.

The radio reports of this night—ethereal, no sooner spoken than lost in the void—might well have been forgotten by the world as only another Wellesian invasion from Mars...had it not been for the headlines in the newspapers. And these, with screaming caution and double talk, left much

unsaid. One shouted:

Scores Die in Jersey Meadows  
as Hysteria Grips Passengers

And scores did die, and their bodies were recovered, and they were buried under tombstones with their names on the tombstones.

A tabloid shrieked its pseudo-science:

Mass Phobia Blamed  
for Night of Terror

Conventional newspapers like the *Times* discussed "the sequel of coincidence." They explained away the welts on the bodies of the dead by pointing to the thorny growth that grew in the marshes. But, like Buckham in his own general lead, they could give their readers—after all—only the hard, factual crust of when, where and who—and scarcely the merest suggestions of what, why and how. Which is hardly strange when it is considered that the reporters of these other papers, like Buckham's reporters, chose this night to get drunk.

But Buckham, there in the editor's office, typing out the numerical squares—Nasiks and Semi-Nasiks, De La Hire's Constructions, and De la Loubere's, and Agrippa's of the orders of 3, 4 and 5—had thought for only one thing in the present: the pert, saucy face of Daisy. He typed the squares in eight-carbon lots, eight to a sheet—a pains-taking, nerve-wracking task, for the slightest error would destroy their worth. And then he cut up the sheets with his shears, and stuffed the hundreds of squares into his pockets.

**L**ADNER WAS not himself. He was sullen and cowed. He'd seen his best troopers that night go into the Meadows on orders and fail to report.

"Take some of these," Buckham urged, pressing a handful of the paper squares towards him as he drove. But

Ladner refused to take his hands from the wheel of his big police car.

"Silly business," he muttered. "I'd as soon ditch the whole thing."

"And leave Daisy out there?"

Ladner did not reply.

"Laddie." Buckham's voice was soft. "It's what we know that counts. We're not like those others who go crazy because they don't understand. In a way, it's because we have some slight comprehension that we're immune."

"Are we?"

The sharp retort stung and Buckham fell silent.

It was dark along the Newark Turnpike. Here and there they found a car in the ditch, and no driver nearby. Ladner kept his fists gripped to the wheel, his eyes straight ahead as if fearing to look off into the marshland. But Buckham's gaze wandered incessantly, seeking a yellow convertible.

South the great lighted Skyway hung suspended against the star-studded heavens. Across the length of the Meadows rose the steel towers of the electric power lines, like gaunt marching giants. To the north, as they neared the junction with the Belleville Turnpike, they could see the glow of the floodlamps on the marshes where the long red trains were stalled. She would not be up there, Buckham thought. She had promised to stay in the zone of the factories.

As they neared the Hackensack, they turned into Fish House Road, drove through the railway underpass and followed the west bank of the river. Suddenly Buckham sat forward and peered through the windshield.

Through a small grove of trees, ahead and off the road to the right, he thought he saw a glint of something yellow.

"Slow, Laddie, slow."

Beyond the screen of trees they came to a narrow causeway—a rutted

lane scarcely the width of a truck, that took off from the highway at a right angle. It was an old road, built high above the marshes, and had once led to a brick yard; and it could now, Buckham remembered, be used as a shortcut to reach one of the Public Service power plants a mile beyond.

Swinging the right spotlight up the causeway, Buckham gasped. The yellow glint that he'd seen was the upended rear of the convertible, its nose buried bank-down in the marshy grass and its seat...empty.

But there was more there than that—much more. They swarmed over the wrecked car and over the causeway and along the banks on both sides of the causeway, moving undulously in and out of the marsh. Even as he stared, Buckham felt the police car lurch and turn. Ladner, eyes glazed, was wrenching the wheel to the right and stepping on the accelerator, purpose in every muscle of his face. Purpose to destroy.

"Stop, dammit, Laddie!"

In a single swift movement Buckham reached to the switch, snapped off the ignition and threw the keys out of the car.

Ladner glared at him. But Buckham's eyes were again on the causeway. Swinging the spot into a position so that it held to the narrow road, he opened the door and stepped to the ground.

Was she...? Could she...?

A DOZEN YARDS beyond the ditched convertible, the old road crossed a canal by a narrow, wooden bridge. And there on the bridge, pinned by the glare of the spotlight, stood Daisy, her blonde hair streaming, her coat gone, her silk waist shredded and exposing her white breasts, her slim body turning, twisting, pirouetting in what seemed like a fantastic and diabolical dance; while

in the penumbra of the light the shapes moved relentlessly about her.

Wrecked in what only could have been the same siren pursuit which had drawn others to their death, she had leaped from the car and fled along the road only to be trapped. And now two sounds reached Buckham's ears in concert. And one was the same metallic wailing that he had heard across the waters from the drawbridge where the bus had burned. And the other, more faintly, was Daisy's soft voice.

There was a rhythm to her voice, as if she were reciting a litany; as if she were a priestess calling upon the outward gods to destroy her enemies. But the voice was weak now, faltering, and when she paused for breath or stopped in her gyrations, the shapes darted in toward her. And it came to Buckham then that in her desperation she had struck upon the same numerical exorcism that had occurred to him. But she, poor child, could use only the frail human voice in her desperate effort to drive them back a little way toward the void. And when her voice would at last fail...

"Coming, dear! Coming!" he shouted. And, reaching into his pockets for a fistful of squares, he started cautiously forward along the causeway holding his hands out before him.

He had not reckoned with Ladner. The lieutenant, crazed by compulsion, had walked around the car from the left and was standing, feet spread apart, staring at the mass of reptile-like movement. Slowly he drew his service revolver and began to fire. One. Two. Three. The reports blasted on Buckham's eardrums. Four!

"Laddie, for God's sake!"

Five.

For a moment the tall, handsome trooper stood stiffly, the wild light of John Rogers in his eyes. Then, too

quickly for Buckham to move, he raised the gun, pressed the muzzle to his temple and with the last bullet shot out his brains.

For an awful moment, Buckham stood galvanized. Then again the faint cry came to him from the bridge. Turning, he pushed forward along the causeway. And as he advanced, the shapes slunk before him, sliding in retreat down the banks into the marsh grass.

He was not ten feet from her when, slowly as if she were melting to the ground, Daisy collapsed. And the obscene things began their final onslaught.

He reached her barely in time. And his touch on her skin was like a magic balm. The mystic squares fluttered to the ground, encircling them, forming a barrier from which the shapes shrank, fading back into the darkness.

Daisy stirred in his arms.

"Bucky... I held on... I knew you'd come."

He gathered her closer to him.

"You're all right now, darling," he whispered. "Hang on tight—forever. Tomorrow..."

## AND TOMORROW?

He sat on the edge of the bed—their bed—and held her hand. The color was returning to her face. She smiled up at him.

"I had the most dreadful dream," she murmured. "I was driving and I ran into a ditch and..."

Her face clouded.

"Funny," she said, "how you can't always remember what happened in a dream."

He got up and stood by the window, looking down into the hotel parking lot. A yellow convertible, both front fenders crumpled, was parked where it had been delivered by a wrecker.

"I'm afraid," he said quietly, "that it wasn't quite all a dream."

He, too, was trying to remember. He reached for a newspaper that lay on the bureau and again read the headline to himself:

Trooper Killed by Own Gun  
While Saving Girl Reporter  
After She Drives Off Road

His own name leaped out at him from the story:

"Zenas Buckham, *Newark Eagle* police reporter, said he was starting for the wrecked car when he heard shots and turned to find Ladner with the gun in his hand. Buckham, who is Miss Lovell's fiance, said he did not know what Ladner was shooting at. Detectives believe that he may have stumbled on the rough ground and that the gun twisted in his hand, discharging the fatal bullet. Powder marks revealed that the shot was from a very close range."

No, Buckham didn't remember making any statement. It was possible, of course. But what happened then? Hadn't he returned to the office? Hadn't he sat at his typewriter a long time? Numbers were whirling through his head, but what did they mean?

There was another, larger headline in the paper:

JERSEY MEADOWS NORMAL  
AFTER NIGHT OF TERROR;  
WORKERS RETURN TO JOBS

And far down in the story:

"A minor note of mystery was added by Hank Parker, Newark air taxi pilot, who reported that early today a tall, red-headed man who appeared very excited hired him to fly low over the Meadows for half an hour. When they were over the area, the stranger tossed out large quantities of small pieces of paper. This happened a number of times.

"'You meet all kinds of queer fish in this business,' Parker said. 'Some advertising or publicity stunt, I suppose. I didn't ask him and he didn't tell me. He paid me my fare, so what the hell?'"

Yes, Buckham thought, there was something familiar about that—and what the hell? He looked at Daisy. She smiled. He leaned down and pressed himself against her and kissed her. They looked into each other's eyes. And what he saw in hers made him shut his own eyes tightly. He would have to be very good to her, he thought.

THE END

# THE LONG AND THE SHORT



By CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT



IT'S A FUNNY thing but nothing in this world is exact. You can't pin anything down—not even in the sciences. In fact *above all*, not even in the sciences. Take physics for an example. If there is any branch of human knowledge that you would be inclined to call exact, that's the one. Yet, contrariwise, it is the science really of inexactitude because it never does anything without considering error.

Consider something as simple as taking a measurement of length. Most people would say that this is the easiest thing in the world. You apply the yardstick or whatever and make a reading. Uh-uh, that's not it at all.

Suppose you want to measure the length of a board and you want to know it pretty accurately. You've got to do a number of

things. In the first place, the only way you can manage to get a reasonably accurate measurement of the length is to take a "set" of readings, maybe a dozen or more—the more the merrier. Then you average these, and *that* average is the most probable answer! If you want to know just what chance you stand of hitting the correct length closely you figure out the "deviations," the differences between each measurement and the average. Then you know exactly how wrong you can be.

This holds for any kind of a measurement. Is it any wonder that statistics is the backbone of modern science? A great deal of knowledge comes from a statistical consideration. The relationship between a crap game with its chances, and a scientific measurement is mighty close.



Ivar's body became a sprawling, falling beetle in the immensity of space...



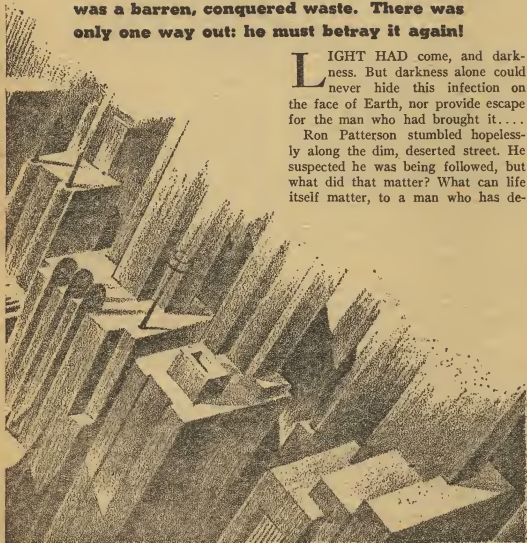
# INVADERS from the VOID

*By Russell Branch*

**Because of one man's betrayal, Earth was a barren, conquered waste. There was only one way out: he must betray it again!**

**L**IGHT HAD come, and darkness. But darkness alone could never hide this infection on the face of Earth, nor provide escape for the man who had brought it....

Ron Patterson stumbled hopelessly along the dim, deserted street. He suspected he was being followed, but what did that matter? What can life itself matter, to a man who has de-





stroyed a planet?

The evidence was all about him, despite the dark. It was the darkness itself, here in the once-brightest city of all. It was the feel of the slime-covered, rotting pavement beneath his feet. It was the stench, the swamp odor of death and decay which seemed to pervade even his oxygen mask. It was the inaudible whisper of a malignant growth as it spread and multiplied and destroyed.

Only a simple algae, the scientists had said at first. Or perhaps more of a fungus—but still no more to be feared than the good green moss of Earth. They had been wrong, of course. But by the time they got around to admitting it, it was already too late. And the people had supplied a name where the scientists had failed. They called it, simply and accurately enough, the *Creeping Death*...

*The Creeping Death.* Ron Patterson repeated the words to himself, and shuddered with the enormity of his guilt.

Not that he had known. No reason why he, any more than anyone else, should have suspected that the seeds of destruction had clung to those mineral specimens he had brought back from Callisto. No reason, either, why it shouldn't have been caught at Quarantine—except for the greedy impatience of a certain high official who had scorned the red tape of every department but his own.

Oh, there were lots of people to share the blame. Lots of mistakes, all duly established and officially recorded. But when you came right down to it: Ron Patterson was the man who had brought it in.

"You're the guy," his mind echoed now with every weary step. "You're it, brother!"

So why had they let him have one

of the precious oxygen masks? Why should he, of all people, be one of the chosen few? They had used the Work-Scale factors in the ruthless, but necessary, process of elimination. Still, many men of more importance had been denied.

And what did they want with him now? He had told the Court of Investigation everything he knew, and it was all a matter of record. So now what? Further recrimination? They could have simply denied him an oxygen helmet. He wished, now, that they had.

Or did he? Another instinct, stronger than despair, protected his helmet now as he slipped and caught himself carefully. And perhaps it didn't matter that he was being trailed—but still he tried to muffle the echo of his lonely steps, and still he scurried from the protection of one shadow to the next. Like an animal in a jungle.

For Capitola, once the seat of World Government and center of all civilization, *was* a jungle. A jungle of rotting steel and concrete, where a man in an oxygen mask was marked for savage death.

**H**ERE AND THERE a campfire flickered in feeble defiance of a Law that no longer existed, here and there another shadow moved. Either there was enough to make Ron Patterson freeze in his steps—even as he asked himself why he bothered. He wondered again whether he was being pursued, and told himself that all he had heard behind him was the echo of his own fear. *They* wouldn't have waited, not the Doomed Ones. But still, ever since he had slipped out into the night from his own lair... ever since he had left behind the protection of that cave, remembered from boyhood, on the far outskirts of the city...

He whirled suddenly now. And caught a glimpse of a dim figure slipping into the deep shadow of an entranceway behind him. So they *were* after him! Stalking him, closing in for the kill.

Instinct took over completely. He began to run, blindly. Behind him pounded the steps of his pursuer, no longer furtive. And a low cry, too. A challenge, a call for reinforcements.

Reason slowed his feet again. There was no place to go, no help for *him*. He didn't know where the Council met; even so, he couldn't bring the savage pack to their door. Better to die, than betray the last remnants of authority in a lawless world and the last slim hope of a hopeless one.

But still, he ran. Even chuckled to himself, with grim futility, as he swerved suddenly into the dark mouth of a mid-block alleyway. On one side towered the empty shell of a condemned apartment house. He ran the length of the building, leaped high to catch the top of the tall fence which extended behind it.

His arms were weak, his oxygen pack a bulky hinderance, but slowly he pulled himself up. One last heave of undernourished muscles, and then he was straddling the barricade. He looked back up the alley with a triumphant grin as he dropped on over.

But triumph faded as he hit the ground on the other side. Even as he dropped, he realized there could be only one explanation why this wooden barricade should still stand in a section where steel and concrete crumbled to the touch. And now, still facing the fence, he caught the flicker of light reflected against the treated surface of the boards. He turned slowly.

**F**OR THE moment they were too startled to move. A dozen or more

ghosts of humanity, huddled around a fire which itself could only smoulder in this fetid atmosphere. Once they had been men and women. Brokers and clerks and technicians and housewives—perhaps they had even lived in the once-luxurious apartment at their backs.

But now they were the beasts of this jungle, clinging desperately to life and their bit of primitive warmth. The embers reflected their gaunt, yellowed faces as they stared at him blankly. And Ron Patterson could only stare back at them with mingled pity and fear.

Then the scene broke. A voice, a hoarse voice which had once belonged to a woman, snarled incredulously: "A helmet! He's got a helmet, that one!"

The man by her side stumbled to his feet with an obscene curse. Then the whole pack rose, with shrill cries and clutched fingers. The helmet would do none of them any good now—in fact they would only kill each other over it. But still it symbolized all they had lost and all whom they hated. It was the mark of "The Chosen"—that ironical term they were screaming at him like a curse.

And Ron sympathized with them, even as he fought for his own life with his back to the fence. Almost automatically he fought, punching and kicking and squirming to rid himself of the skeletal hands which tore at his head and chest.

He broke free for an instant, long enough to see how well he had trapped himself. The high barricade enclosed the small yard on all three sides, with the side of the building at the other end. He could never scale that again. Even if he found the strength, they would pull him down first and swarm over him by the sheer weight of number.

There was only one way out: through the shell of the building itself. One misstep might bring it down on his head, or send him hurtling through a rotted floor—but it was his only chance.

He fought them off again and broke away. A closed door in the wall confronted him, and one man reached him again and clung to his arm. But Ron shook him loose with a bone-crunching blow, and the door collapsed at his shove.

Then he was running through the pitch-black interior, slipping and stumbling with the mob in full cry behind him. He ran straight ahead, trusting his hunch that this was an apartment house, and that the corridor would lead straight through the building to a front entrance.

He crashed headlong into some obstruction. It gave beneath his weight, but pitched him to the floor in a stunned heap. He staggered up, shaking his dazed head, and instinctively feeling to make sure the helmet was still intact and in place. Behind him the pursuit drew closer. A flare flamed up suddenly in the dark behind him, and a cry of discovery.

Ahead still lay utter blackness, but with a square patch of lighter darkness which promised the exit he had hoped for. He reached it, and found the street.

**BUT STILL** they were on his heels. Closing in on him from behind, with shrill cries to bring others to the hunt. Two figures were already running diagonally across the street, heading him off, and down the block others poured from their dark holes to block him there. He was completely surrounded now—and even as he realized this, he was already fighting off the first attackers.

Left ... right ... dodge ... kick

...they were weaker than he and went down easily, but always more swarmed in like a circling pack of wolves. He fought valiantly for several minutes, and then suddenly they were too much for him, and he was going down...down...

The next few moments were dazed ones. Ron knew only that he was at the bottom of a screaming, struggling heap. Others were trying to pull away those who had downed him, a pack of wolves fighting each other now for the spoils.

The pressure gave way suddenly. The screams of revenge were suddenly shrieks of terror and pain and warning; they scrambled away from him. Until there were only three still holding him down—and they no longer clawed or struggled or even moved.

Unbelievably, Ron shoved their limp bodies aside and struggled back to his feet. His attackers were fleeing in every direction, scurrying for cover. One man still hesitated near him, turned as if to renew the attack. The next instant he crumpled where he stood, in a blinding flash of blue flame which spurted out from the gloom of the building Ron had just abandoned.

Ron waited no longer to question the miracle which had saved him. The blue arc told him all he wanted to know: that someone, somehow, was still in possession of a lethal weapon. That in itself was enough in a city where all weapons had long ago been confiscated and destroyed, in the first useless attempt to prevent civil riots. Ron thought not that he had been saved—but only had been luckier so far than those poor souls whose bodies were strewn about him in dim heaps. So he dashed for cover, too, even as desperately as had his erstwhile attackers.

Two blocks away, satisfied that he had escaped, he slowed down to take

stock. He was still alive. He still had his helmet. And somewhere the last guardians of civilization still awaited him. For that reason alone he would keep going as long as he could. There was hope implicit in the mere fact that they had summoned him.

WHO "THEY" were, and where they were, Ron still didn't know. Even more, he wondered how they had found him.

A man had brought the summons the previous night. A Doomed one, Ron had thought at first, who had suddenly appeared at the mouth of his cave like a messenger of Death. Ron had leaped to his feet, prepared to fight for his life, but the eyes of the man had stopped him. They met his without envy or hate; with calm dignity instead of insane longing for the helmet Ron wore.

His message had been direct and simple. "Patterson, you are needed by the Council. Tomorrow night you will go to the Plaza in the city, leaving here immediately after dusk. At the fountain there you will be met by a guide who will take you to the meeting place. You will know him by his helmet...and I don't have to warn you to watch your step."

A smile flickered briefly in his sunken eyes, a wasted hand raised in a gesture meaning "good luck", and then the aged messenger had vanished as suddenly as he had come.

He had been, then, not one of the Doomed Ones, nor one of the Chosen. Rather, in the primitive terms of this primitive world, one of the very few Trusted. And before, in the civilized world...well, Ron hated even to guess what great abilities and authority had probably once been vested in that still noble figure.

But there had been no questioning the summons. And now he was almost

there. Ahead lay the empty stretch of the Plaza square, there the spot where once the Fountain of Light had played its luminous symphonies.

Ron hurried forward, remembering the carefree evenings of a vanished past when this same spot had been only a lovers' rendezvous, and wondering when his guide would show himself. Suddenly he halted, and wondered no longer.

A body lay at his feet, in the very rubble which had once been the high shaft of the Fountain. The grotesque, shapeless heap told the story even in that light, and as Ron took another step forward his feet kicked the broken shards of an oxygen helmet.

He straightened up with a hopeless sigh. Thinking not of his own danger, but only that he could never find the Council now. The fact that they had risked one of their own members showed how badly they needed him.

But there wasn't the slightest chance of his finding them without a guide. Not when hordes of savage people had scoured the city looking for the leaders they thought had betrayed them. Not a chance. Not even an incentive now to keep himself alive...nothing...

Ron was so wrapped in his own discouragement that he didn't even hear the light, cautious footsteps approaching from behind. He neither cared, nor knew, that anyone was near until the quiet, cool voice impinged on his consciousness.

"Poor Ramsey," it murmured. "He was a valuable man. I wonder if you're worth it, Patterson?"

## CHAPTER II

RON WHIRLED, hardly believing his own senses. A feminine voice, a lovely if bitter one, in the midst of this nightmare?

But she stood facing him, a slender outline in trim flying togs. Starlight gleamed dully on the weapon in her hand, and Ron recognized its shape as that of the government-model Lethoray. That—and something in her proud stance, some remembered quality of her voice, prodded his memory.

"Varie Merlo!"

"Ron Patterson," she echoed mockingly. "The intrepid explorer of space. I called to you back there, but you ran like a scared rabbit."

He grinned wryly. "I might have known. I might have known that if anyone had a Lethoray, it would be someone like you. Some privileged character, like the President's daughter."

She answered, more in contempt than resentment: "And weren't you lucky I did, my friend?"

"I'm not so sure," Ron answered slowly. "I'll fight for my life, sure, but—"

"You weren't doing very well."

"Maybe not. But cold-blooded slaughter, with an illegal weapon..."

She shook her head wonderingly. "You're a strange man, Patterson, with a strange sense of values. Those poor souls were dying anyway, dying slowly and painfully. And for some reason, the Council seems to think *you're* more important."

"And what about you? You seem to be wearing a mask too, as well as carrying what is probably the last gun in the city. What's *your* job, baby? Besides shadowing men you dislike, I mean."

She didn't answer. She merely turned away, slipping the gun back in its holster. "Come on."

Ron followed her, still grinning wryly to himself. Remembering those first secret interviews with the great Addison Merlo...remembering too the cold antagonism of his daughter, who

had served as his secretary. In other words, she had gotten under his skin, even then, and was still there...

"The famed and fabulous Miss Merlo," he murmured at her back. "I still can't believe my luck."

She turned her head impatiently. "The less noise we make the more chance we have of getting there. And I suggest you keep your distance, so that we can't be jumped both at once."

A very practical suggestion, delivered in practical, impersonal tones. Ron fell back fifty feet, trailing along behind her in the shadows of the buildings. They had reached Zone One now—the section where the Creeping Death had first started. It was hard to believe that less than three months ago these crumbling ruins had once housed the central government of an entire planet. But now there was nothing left, not even much to attract an occasional scavenging party, and the degree of infection here was so bad as to discourage even that.

Ron wondered how the Council itself managed to exist in this dread region. Suddenly he found himself almost on top of Varie Merlo, who halted with a warning gesture. He slipped into a wall crevice beside her, holding his breath.

A hundred yards ahead, a tattered band of ghosts filed across the rubble-choked street. A band of the Doomed, apparently still searching for the leaders they thought had deserted them. Men with only hate and desperation left to sustain them; and their silent march across these desolate ruins seemed a symbol of man's final defeat.

Ron sighed to himself, grateful at least for the human warmth of the body so close to his. Then he was aware that Varie, for all her apparent hardness, was trembling too.

Whether from fear, or fatigue, or an emotion like his—Ron didn't know. But instinctively he put his arms around her, and held her close, and so they remained until the danger had passed.

Then she pulled away abruptly, and her voice was ice hard. "Shall we go, Romeo?"

"Lead on," he answered, and was glad she couldn't see his face.

**THE COUNCIL**, as Ron suspected, had gone underground literally as well as figuratively.

They felt their way in blackness down the first flight of crumbling concrete stairs, and then Varie produced a tiny pocket raylight. The light aroused Ron's resentment again, and also confirmed his guess. They were in one of those old underground warrens, those ancient bomb shelters from another dark age in the history of man.

Most of them had long since been sealed off. A few, such as this, had been kept in condition for possible practical use. But even here the Creeping Death had begun its inroads. Its bright orange mycellium already threaded the walls and the baffles which were set out from them in staggered sequence.

The lower galleries became progressively cleaner as they descended, however, and finally ahead lay the air-lock, with the massive durasteel doors which sealed the inner chamber. Varie opened the outer one by pushing a concealed button, then waited to close it behind. The interior of the lock was brightly lit, and Ron was already searching for the release on the second door when Varie laughed behind him.

"First, my friend, we decontaminate ourselves. You can't open it anyway."

Whereupon she calmly began to strip. Ron stared in amazement, first

at her, then at the row of garments already hanging along the hooks, then back at her.

"But...look..." he stammered.

"Look if you must," she said scornfully, "but it has to be done. Off with the clothes, Lover Boy."

Ron turned his back and grimly followed her example. If ever there was a girl who needed spanking, he thought, and if ever there was an opportunity....

But he was too much of a gentleman to take advantage of it. In fact, he heaved a sigh of relief when a garment like a long hospital gown was tossed unceremoniously over his shoulder. He put it on and turned to find Varie similarly, if more fetchingly, attired.

But his embarrassment was still not at an end. Varie picked up an ordinary old-fashioned garden spray, and sprayed him with intimate thoroughness. Ron recognized the color and the acrid fumes. It was TRX3, the scarce compound which was the only thing known even to discourage the orange blight. That same precious chemical had stained the fence he had climbed earlier in the evening—undoubtedly part of the precious government hoard which had been looted.

Satisfied with her job on him, Varie handed over the spray and indicated that he was to return the favor. Ron obliged, trying to remain completely objective about the job in spite of the lush lines under the thin, clinging garment.

Finally she nodded, and moved away. She spoke a stream of meaningless syllables into what looked like an ornamental device on the face of the inner door. Machinery whirled as she gave the verbal combination, and then the heavy door swung slowly open.

The guard on the other side lowered his Lethoray gun and nodded to Varie as they went past. A "guard"

whom Ron recognized despite the nightshirt—the Supreme Commander of the World Security force! He followed closely behind as they went on down the short passageway, and at last came into the chamber where a world would be saved—or lost.

**RON'S FIRST** impressions were practical ones. Lights...oxygen. Varie was already hanging her own helmet carefully beside the others strung along the rear wall. Ron followed her lead again, surprised at how few there were. Not even enough, apparently, for all of the forty men or so who stared silently at the newcomers.

Except for the guard's, there were no arms in evidence. Varie's had vanished too—except for a suspicious bulge under her robe in a spot where nature had never intended Varie to bulge! Again Ron found himself wondering at the girl's role and motives.

A low murmur followed Ron down the aisle behind Varie. "That's Patterson," he could hear them whispering. "*That's* the man we can thank for all this."

For his part, Ron recognized a few guilty faces too. Important men who had failed their jobs and now were trying desperately to make up for it. And most of all—the man who now rapped his gavel as if parliamentary procedure could save the world.

Eric Kiger. The former Chief of Exploration and Resources, who had bullied a petty Quarantine official into releasing those mineral specimens from Callisto. Who, at the hearings, had constantly played down his own mistake by pointing at Ron Patterson.

Ron hated him, naturally; but still was not surprised to find him heading the Council as Addison Merlo's successor. Kiger was rugged, hard-driving, tough-skinned. A born leader, for such times as this. Furthermore—and Ron knew this from his own ex-

perience—Kiger had an immense grasp of technical knowledge in many fields.

"Order, gentlemen! Order, please!" Kiger met Ron's stare with a glare of his own. "Mr. Patterson, you did not return with the guide we sent to meet you."

Ron rose, flushing at the suspicion in the man's voice. But Varie Merlo spoke up before he could make his own answer.

"If you please, Mr. President, I brought Patterson here on my own responsibility. I happened to see him—he was wandering around like a lost soul—and took pity on him. I knew he was needed here."

Chuckles, and an appreciative grin from Kiger. Ron glanced at Varie, wondering what motive had prompted that deliberately casual description of her night's activities. Whatever her game was, he could play it too.

"I proceeded to the rendezvous as directed," he said stiffly. "Unfortunately, your guide was dead."

Someone murmured, "Poor Ramsey," and Kiger banged the gavel again with unsentimental impatience. "So you see, Mr. Patterson, why we must take every precaution. However, you seem to be safely here, thanks to Miss Merlo, and for your benefit I shall repeat some facts already known to the rest of us... Please do sit down, Mr. Patterson!"

Ron sat, feeling like a schoolboy.

"We all know," Kiger went on, "that no practical method of controlling the fungus has been found. In fact our laboratories themselves have all succumbed, thus preventing further experimentation.

"Our sources of power have failed, and all forms of communication. Even so, there is no good reason to hope that any other spot on this globe has escaped. Many airships touched here in the normal flow of commerce be-



fore we set up our own self-imposed quarantine. Even then, many private citizens escaped our patrols—undoubtedly to flee abroad and thus spread the infection..."

"That's common knowledge even outside," Ron interrupted. "What about the other settled planets? Mars, Venus?"

**KIGER IGNORED** the interruption. "Unquestionably, the orange blight has spread its tentacles far and wide over the face of our own planet. Since Capitola, with all its resources, was unable to halt the destruction, there is no hope that other cities have fared better. The fact that no earth ships have appeared, proves it.

"As for the other planets...we have all hoped, of course, that our silence in itself would be enough to attract attention. That at least our own outposts on Mars or Venus would investigate and come to our aid."

Kiger paused dramatically. "That hope, gentlemen, is gone. Two nights ago a Martian patrol ship moved within eye range. We managed to communicate by blinker—with a portable raybeam which was among the emergency equipment stored here. Their answer was as plain as it was disheartening: any ship which even attempts to leave Earth will be attacked and blown to bits."

Silence. Bitter silence—and then the Supreme Commander of a mighty force which no longer existed, screamed hysterically: "Just find me one ship—and we'll see about that!"

"You can't blame 'em, can you?" demanded Ron involuntarily. "They know what happened here; they've seen the results now. We'd do the same thing in their shoes—and let's not kid ourselves about that!"

It was only the truth, of course, but the truth can be scant comfort. Hostility glared at Ron from every side, and from his dias, Kiger grinned

down at him sardonically.

"Objectivity, my young friend, can be anything but a virtue when you're fighting for your life. Also—you were summoned by the Council for a specific purpose, and not to give us lessons in logic."

Ron flushed, and Kiger raised his voice again. "The truth of the matter, gentlemen, is that we *do* have a ship!"

Stunned silence for a moment, and then a rising babble of excitement. Kiger held up his hand again.

"A ship, yes. But one with limitations. It is an experimental model, which happened to be undergoing tests that saved it. Mr. Stillman knew of it—and after much searching he and I finally located it. It is stored in an underground chamber like this—except it is one which was fitted out as a vacuum chamber. From the observation window, at least, it appears to be still untouched...we didn't open the chamber, of course."

Kiger grinned at his audience. "I'll admit I was tempted, even as any of you would have been. But there were several drawbacks, aside from my own sense of duty. This ship is incredibly small, which indicates its radical design. Secondly, I doubt that anyone here, with the possible exception of Mr. Patterson, is capable of flying it. It reminded me of nothing more than the ship which he flew to Callisto—and unfortunately, back again."

Ron nodded slowly. "The K-3. I heard of it—an even more advanced model of my ship."

"So," said Kiger, "now you shall have your chance to...shall we say, redeem yourself?"

Ron hesitated, his thoughts in a turmoil.

"You mean you're *afraid* to tackle it, Mr. Patterson?"

Ron flared up. "Of course not! My past record speaks for itself, in that regard. But—"

"There are no 'buts', Mr. Patterson! Not for a man in *your* position!"

Ron tried to choke back his resentment. Varie, Kiger...everybody wanted a kick at the man who was already down. He could feel the hostility of the group closing in around him from every side.

"You have a purpose, a reason for making this trip?"

"I can show you one," said Kiger furiously. "Even if it has to be a gun at your head."

"In that case..." Ron grinned thinly, "If that's the best reason you can offer...the answer is no."

### CHAPTER III

FOR A moment the silence was so thick that Ron could almost hear the sound of Kiger's jaw dropping. Then the room exploded into violence. Voices rose in cries of contempt, and chairs were pushed back. The ex-Supreme Commander started down the aisle, gun drawn and outraged patriotism oozing from every pore.

Ron sat where he was, cold and withdrawn and almost indifferent. Kiger tried to regain his dignity by pounding with his gavel—but it was another voice which stopped them all in their tracks.

"Stop it, you fools! Stop it, I say!"

Varie Merlo stood on the seat of her chair, her Lethoray poised and threatening. Ron stared up at her with as much astonishment as the rest. She glanced down at him and bit her lip, with obvious uncertainty.

The Commander saw it and moved toward her. "I'll have to confiscate that weapon, Miss Merlo."

"You'll have to take it away from me first," she said flatly, and raised her voice again. "Gentlemen, this is the Council! You're behaving like... like a bunch of hysterical women! I am not defending Mr. Patterson, but

only his right to be heard." She glanced at Ron again, with that same strange look of hostile calculation. "How about it, Mr. Patterson? What reason can you possibly give for refusing this assignment?"

"I haven't refused any assignment yet," Ron answered evenly. "I only refuse to be threatened. If Mr. Kiger has a plan which makes sense, I would like to hear it."

The room quieted, and with an effort, Kiger swallowed his anger. "I am surprised that it is necessary to elaborate the obvious. We know nothing further can be accomplished here, we know now that we cannot expect outside help. Our only chance, good or bad, is to send an expedition out.

"As Patterson should know, he himself brought this curse back to Earth when he returned from the first successful trip ever made to that barren satellite of Jupiter called Callisto. At the hearings, he himself testified that similar growths exist there—although, he said, not in the virulent form which we have the misfortune to know. That suggests to me, if not to Patterson, that some natural enemy of the orange fungus keeps it in check on Callisto.

"We have a ship, which Patterson himself admits is even more advanced than the one he used on his first trip. We can therefore attempt to reach Callisto again, ferret out and bring back whatever it is that attacks the fungus. Failing that, we can at least land on Mars or even Jupiter and attempt to enlist aid. I know that I would gladly take the chance—and so would any of you—if we had the benefit of Patterson's skill and experience."

RON SHOOK his head slowly. "It doesn't ever hurt to look before you leap. In the first place, you are assuming that the original spores were imported with my mineral specimens

from Callisto..."

"It was the assumption of the official investigation," Kiger growled.

"All right. I also pointed out that I had touched Jupiter in an emergency landing on my return trip. But since it is true that the fungus has never been reported from Jupiter, I'll waive the point.

"Even so, it may not be a 'natural enemy', or parasite, which controls the growth in its home territory. It may be due simply to the difference in atmosphere, lack of oxygen alone. Our lab tests were never extensive enough to establish that point..."

"We can talk till doomsday about what *wasn't* done!" Kiger cut in again.

"All right," Ron admitted. "I agree that Callisto itself is worth a try. But as for landing on Mars or Jupiter or any other inhabited planet...no. Jupiter is unfriendly, to say the least. Only luck saved me the last time, and it would be useless suicide to approach that planet for help. Mars is—or was—friendly. But that is reason enough to stop me from carrying the contamination to them too. Our own people there and on Venus are virtual exiles; they have sacrificed enough already without bringing them our new affliction."

Ron's answer was weighed in silence. Then Kiger forced his face into another sardonic grin. "I yield to Mr. Patterson's nice little sense of ethics. However—and impressed as I am by his over-worked conscience—I do suggest that as many as possible accompany him to remind him of his assigned goal once he has escaped the fate which the rest of us must await."

Kiger's voice was at once a sneer and a challenge. In fact, he seemed almost deliberately bent on arousing conflict in an atmosphere already tense with desperation. For that reason alone, Ron ignored the slur.

"I agree," he said. "However, I

doubt that the K-3 can carry more than two or three passengers. Like the K-2, it was intended for experimental work only. Also, how do we get the ship out of its underground test chamber? Even if we had the machinery and men to disassemble it and then reassemble it above-ground, it would be hopelessly contaminated before we even started."

"I am not a complete numbskull," answered Kiger, "and neither is Mr. Stillman, who helped me locate the ship. The test chamber was apparently remodeled for its specific purpose. The overhead part rolls back—or did. However, now it has disintegrated to the point where actually the ship is protected only by the plastifilm shell which was sprayed inside the chamber to make it airtight. The ship should be well able to blast its own way out..."

Kiger paused, and glanced around at his audience. "Aside from Mr. Patterson's cold feet, there is only one question. And that, gentlemen, is the toughest of all! *Who goes with our reluctant hero?*"

Ron, already busy with his own problems, listened with only half an ear to the discussion which followed. At first, unselfishness and reason prevailed. It was ascertained by a careful check that none of the surviving members of the Council could qualify as a competent botanist or bacteriologist, or even as a chemist. Ramsey—poor Ramsey—had been the expert in that field.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS were offered, but none agreeable to all. They wouldn't admit it, even to themselves, but the august members of the Council were human too. They were also exhausted, hopeless, and desperate. The veneer began to crack under the strain. Accusations of self-interest were hurled back and forth. A fist-

fight broke out on the far side of the room.

And Eric Kiger helped not at all. "Let us be frank," he said grimly. "By reason of technical knowledge alone, I myself am probably the most logical candidate. But you all want to go. You would all risk anything to escape this hell for even a few days."

A harsh voice answered him. "You're damned right! And I'm not giving up my chance to any other skunk who tries to call himself a scientist!"

That was all Kiger needed, apparently. He was off his platform in one leap, already swinging. Others dove in, and the last vestige of order on Earth gave way. What was very likely the last meeting of the Council had turned into a free-for-all.

Ron backed away from the melee, seeking for Varie Merlo with some instinctive notion of offering protection. But that, he decided, was a laugh. Varie had already taken advantage of the situation to make a quick exit. Trust Varie.

And the fighting was not to end with fists. Men had already piled on the stout Supreme Commander, fighting for possession of his gun. Ron hesitated, knowing it was too late now to bring any of them back to their senses. Hunger and despair had finally broken the leaders even as it had the people; what had started as an argument was now a deadly grim struggle for survival.

A hand grabbed Ron's arm, and he turned to defend himself. It was Kiger, panting and torn. But he was only pointing toward the rear exit. "Come on!"

Ron still hesitated, and Kiger pulled him away. "*They* don't matter! If *you* get hurt, everything's lost!"

He grabbed up one of the oxygen masks, and thrust another at Ron. "Quick! While we still have a

chance!"

But they had already been spotted. Several men yelled as they saw Kiger running toward the exit corridor. Ron dashed after him with the mob already on his heels. As he slipped through the air-lock door, Kiger slammed it behind him.

"That'll hold 'em for a minute! Let's go!"

**B**LINKINGLY, RON followed him along the black tunnel and up the endless stairs, adjusting his helmet as he ran. Then finally they came out into the starlit wasteland of the surface, and after several corners Kiger paused to catch his wind.

"Where now?" asked Ron breathlessly.

"The ship, of course. Stillman knows where it is, too, and will probably lead the others—but we'll get there first!"

"You're going to desert them?"

"Animals! Crazy animals. They'll only kill each other anyway, and perhaps wreck the ship in the bargain. It's up to you and me, Patterson. If we don't make it, no one ever will."

Kiger set off again at a run, and Ron followed. Much as he disliked the man, he had to admit the brutal logic of his explanation. If that ship was ever to get away—and if Earth's only salvation—did depend on it—there was no time to worry about anything else. Not even Varie Merlo. No single life was as important as this.

Ron could already hear their pursuers behind, but Kiger was leading the way without hesitation. Through ruined buildings, down one street and up another. Until finally they had reached the edge of the Central Air-strip, and had found the mouth of another black tunnel.

Kiger produced a raylight, and they went on down. There were only two short flights of stairs here, before the

airlock. The outside doors had already been eaten away at their pivots and hung ajar. The inner door was still in place, but groaned as Kiger pushed it open. Then Ron caught the gleam of still another door in the beam of the light; and through the observation port in its center, the glistening skin of a spaceship's slender nose.

The glimpse itself was enough to thrill Ron. Kiger was already fumbling at the door, but he straightened up with a sharp exclamation. "Somebody's already been here!"

Together they burst into the test chamber, and now it was Ron who led the way. His first glimpse had satisfied him that externally, at least, the K-3 was not too different from her predecessor. His hand found a familiar release in the side hatch, his foot a familiar step, and then he was in. The cabin was empty.

Ron bent over the controls as Kiger pulled the hatch closed, his fingers seeking the familiar switches. One clicked, and the cabin burst into light. Kiger breathed triumphantly over his shoulder: "Told you she was still okay!"

"Sure," muttered Ron dryly, "the lights even work. Now if this baby's hot—and I don't burn out the whole works—we're okay."

More switches, then an unfamiliar toggle tentatively, and a familiar throb gladdened his ears. Ron trimmed them all back with a delicate, sure touch. The strange board was suddenly as easy to him now as that of a flitter-jet to any airpark attendant. He was home, he had a ship under him again, and he was happy...

"At least," he muttered, as he blew the tubes once again in quick succession, "I'll die happy. How about you, Kiger?"

Kiger's teeth gleamed in the greenish reflected light of the dials. "We'll decide that later. Right now I'm in-

terested in getting away from here, before that damned fungus eats this ship right out from underneath us. And before our friends catch up with us. They *do* have a Lethoray, you know."

Ron had already taken the words out of Kiger's mouth. He hadn't been listening anyway; his ears had been testing the muted whine of the tubes. And now he cut them all in, with a yell of warning. "Here we go! Hold tight!"

The last, of course, was only the spaceman's standard gag for such occasions. Gravity held them in an iron grip as the tubes blasted wide open; the force of acceleration slammed them deep into the cushions of their padded seats and squeezed them as in a vise. They didn't even feel the slight jolt as the ship burst through the fungus-rotted overhead. They didn't feel anything but that excruciating pressure until the **long** minutes had passed and the weight of 5 G's had eased.

Ron pulled out of it first. He trimmed his controls again, sighed with satisfaction, and then glanced at his still-gasping companion.

"Well... Callisto, here we come! I only hope we'll be able to do something for those poor wretches we're leaving behind."

Kiger was shaking his head. "Not Callisto, my friend."

"What d'you mean?"

"Jupiter," Kiger said—and there was a gun in his hand to back it up.

#### CHAPTER IV

**IT WASN'T** much of a weapon at first glance, in fact it looked like a toy in Kiger's hand. But its reputation was known throughout space. The famous little air-gun from Jupiter: it shot a tiny, invisible jet of "hard air" which killed at close range just as

surely as the blast from any ordinary gun.

Kiger nodded his head, but the gun remained steady. "Get to work on those controls, Patterson. Set your course for Jupiter."

Ron hesitated a second longer, still measuring his chances with a careful eye. Finally he shrugged and leaned forward and manipulated the course-computer dial. He was grinning as he leaned back and looked around at Kiger again.

"Okay, tough guy. Around and around it goes. Let's see what you can do now with that pop-gun of yours."

Even as Ron spoke, the throbbing of the generators faded and the tubes died out with a soft whine.

"Blast you! I'll—"

"No you won't," said Ron. "Not unless you want to spend the rest of your life in this cabin. We're in the orbital grove already, and here we stay."

Kiger's face set, his hand tightened around the gun.

"It's okay by me," Ron said quietly. "Go right ahead, if you want to spend the rest of your days circling around Earth. When it gets too boring you can always blow yourself up. It's going to take a better hand than yours to pull this baby out of it without burning her up, I can promise you that."

Sweat glistened on Kiger's heavy face. "Patterson, you're either a rock-headed fool or a traitor, and I still don't know which."

"I told you I'd listen to reason, but guns don't impress me. Particularly a gun like that. Maybe you should begin by explaining that much of it."

Kiger shrugged. "It was in the government collection. One of the few we saved when we destroyed the armory to keep them out of the hands of the mob."

"A Jupiter air-gun, and now you

want to head for Jupiter. Just a coincidence...or is it?"

"That's all," Kiger answered wearily. "I don't have to explain the second part to you."

"You might try—unless you just want to wait until the oxygen gives out."

**K**IGER ANSWERED grimly, watching Ron's face. "You know as well as I do that the Creeping Death isn't any accident of nature. It's a synthetic culture—deliberately planted on Earth for a deliberate purpose."

Ron stared at the man incredulously. "You mean...it's a weapon? In other words...*biological warfare*?"

"An attempt to destroy Earth completely, or at least render it helpless against an eventual invasion. We can blame our old friends on Jupiter... and also the traitor who smuggled it in."

Kiger added the last with accusing emphasis, and it all came suddenly clear to Ron. He understood now the mysterious official secrecy which had surrounded the whole problem. And he understood the hostility which had greeted him from every side. They all suspected *him*—at least, all those who knew the truth about the "fungus". He remembered now how during the investigation the Court had harped on the details of his emergency landing on Jupiter.

"So you really think," he asked slowly, "that that's where we'll find our answer?"

"What do *you* think?"

Despite the unfair implication, Ron could only nod. Jupiter was the scourge of the System, a heritage from the dark days following the Atomic wars. An Inquisition had followed the holocaust. All scientists, all technicians, engineers, and anyone who had had any conceivable part in the wars

—all had been branded indiscriminately as war criminals and banished to the then-outermost planet.

But Jupiter, for all its molten lava beds and steaming glaciers, had proved not so much a prison as an arsenal. The exiles had found it rich in uranium; they and their descendants had built an outlaw civilization which had outstripped Earth in scientific development while remaining barbaric in culture. For the only cultural heritage of the Jupes had been war; their only ambition, revenge; and the Creeping Death could easily be their first step toward their goal of conquest.

So Ron nodded, but protested Kiger's implication that he had been the tool of the Jupes. "It was only luck I got away with my own life, when I landed there."

Kiger's smile was sarcastic.

"All right. *You* were the man who by-passed Quarantine with those contaminated minerals. Otherwise, it would have been caught and checked in time."

"And your ship was thoroughly checked when you first got back," Kiger countered. "Our mechanics could find no evidence of the troubles which you claimed forced you to make an emergency landing on Jupiter."

ONCE AGAIN Ron was at loss for an answer. It was true—there had been something strange about the whole affair. The mysterious trouble which had forced him down in the first place, his lucky escape from the Jupes, only to find that his ship once again functioned perfectly, and the final inspection which had failed to reveal anything wrong...

"Well," Kiger was saying with another shrug. "There's one good way to prove your innocence. We're not going to prove anything this way."

"There's still a couple of questions

that bother me. First of all, Kiger, that fight which broke up the Council meeting didn't just happen."

"What d'you mean, it didn't happen?"

"I mean you deliberately encouraged it."

"Maybe I did," Kiger admitted blandly. "It would have ended up that way, anyway. If *anyone* was to escape, it had to come quick, and while the rest were momentarily distracted. I just took advantage of the inevitable, that's all. Otherwise, *no one* would have escaped. What's your other question?"

"Just this," Ron answered, leaning over and reaching casually for the gun in Kiger's lap. "If it came from the government collection, chances are it's not—"

Ron was wrong. Kiger had pulled back suddenly as he realized what Ron was up to, and his finger had jerked the trigger apparently involuntarily. There was a sharp little *zzt!* but it missed Ron and by that time his hand had closed over Kiger's wrist.

Ron had the advantage, being already on his feet, but Kiger was strong and fast. He twisted sideways in his seat, bringing one foot up in a kick that sent Ron crashing against the control board. Ron dove back in as Kiger got to his feet, raising the gun.

Again that sharp little spit of sound, but once again Ron's hand had closed around Kiger's wrist and the shot went astray. Ron hung on desperately as the big man struggled to pull his arm free, driving him backward across the narrow width of the small cabin.

Kiger crashed against the bulkhead, losing his balance for an instant that was all Ron needed. A sudden twist and heave—the tiny gun fell to the deck while Kiger yelped with agony.

Neither of them had noticed the door opening from the rear compart-



ment, neither of them had heard the first sharp command. But they both heard it now—Kiger as he held his arm in pain, Ron as he bent to retrieve the fallen weapon.

"All right, boys. Leave that gun alone!"

Ron straightened around slowly, with a last longing glance at the weapon lying at his feet. But he had recognized the voice, and he could guess the authority that went with it. He looked at Varie Merlo, and at the Lethoray in her hand, with a rueful grin.

"Everybody in this league seems to have a gun but me."

Behind him Kiger cursed and made a sudden move, but Varie's gun moved even faster.

"You, too, Mr. Kiger. Get back there!"

**S**HE EDGED carefully forward, still keeping them covered as she reached down and groped for the little Jupe gun with her left hand. Her face was white and grim. She still wore the loose gown which she had put on in the Council chamber, but it was ripped along one side and deep red scratches showed against the cream of her exposed skin. Ron could only imagine what torture the take-off must have brought to her, hiding there in the bare cargo compartment without a padded seat to cushion the shock.

And Kiger, for all the pain of his own twisted arm, was thinking the same thing. "Great space; Varie! It's a wonder you weren't killed!"

She straightened up, holding both guns now. "I blacked-out, fortunately. Until just a few minutes ago. Then I find you two scrapping like children, instead of worrying about your mission! What's the matter with you?"

Kiger quickly took the opportunity to repeat the argument which had led to the fight. He was still rubbing his elbow resentfully, but his smooth air

of self-assurance was back. Obviously he took for granted that Varie was on his side; just as obviously he suspected Ron's motives more than ever.

Ron remained silent, knowing his protest would do no good. As Kiger talked he tried to figure out where Varie Merlo stood in this whole screwy setup. She had ducked out of the Council meeting at the first sign of trouble—either knowing or guessing what it would lead to. Also, she had obviously known the location of the ship, which was supposed to have been a secret to all but Kiger and one other man.

Were Varie and Kiger working together then? Still, Kiger had been just as startled as he himself when their other passenger had made her sudden appearance. Also, Varie had taken a dangerous chance in concealing herself during the take-off—a risk which would have been unnecessary unless she were playing some inexplicable game of her own. Perhaps *she* was in league with the Jupes?

Studying her white, determined face now, Ron found that unthinkable. Her own father—the great Addison Merlo whom Ron had worshipped as a hero ever since boyhood—had been a voluntary victim of the Creeping Death. Addison Merlo had refused an oxygen mask, both to set an example and because, he had said, his own usefulness had ended. He had gone out, then, to perish among his own unfortunate people. Could the daughter of this noble soul be a traitor?

She turned to him now, as if aware of his baffled scrutiny. "What's your side of it, Patterson?"

Ron shrugged. "Kiger's suspicious of me. I'm suspicious of him...everybody's suspicious of everybody. So here we sit, coasting along on a nice orbit that will get us nowhere."

Varie frowned, glanced at the control panel.

"I wouldn't, Miss Merlo! This baby's velocity is somewhere up there close to the speed of light—and like I told Kiger, it's going to take more than an amateur to bring her out of it."

SHE BIT her lip, shaking her head in perplexity. "I don't understand you. Mr. Kiger's told you what some of the rest of us have already suspected: that the fungus represents a deadly attack on us by Jupiter. And yet you still refuse to do what you can to help?"

"You agree with Kiger then?" Ron asked. "You think we should take on Jupiter all by ourselves, just to make sure?"

"What else is there?" Varie flared back at him. "Maybe we haven't got a chance in a million—but it's still one that anybody else would take. Anybody with any loyalty to Earth, that is!"

Behind her Kiger grinned smugly. Ron asked slowly, "And that's your *only* reason for wanting to tackle Jupiter?"

The girl answered furiously, "That's reason enough, for anybody with an ounce of courage in his veins!"

"Miss Merlo had another reason, too," Kiger interposed softly. "A personal reason, you might say. You see, her father was one of the first to suspect the true origin of the orange blight. Or perhaps he knew from the beginning..."

"My father sacrificed himself for the world," Varie interrupted indignantly.

"Maybe he did, my dear. But *not* the way the public was led to believe. You see, Patterson, when Addison Merlo resigned, there still remained one space cruiser, hidden and sealed, whose existence was known only to a few top officials. And when the ex-President disappeared—so did that

ship and some picked men who had been saved for an emergency crew."

Kiger paused and then finished with a shrug. "You can draw your own conclusions, but at any rate I agree with our charming stowaway. Jupiter's the place to find our answers."

Ron glanced at Varie Merlo, his thoughts awlirl again. The look on her face was enough to confirm Kiger's startling story. She was staring at the big man, looking surprised and worried and crafty all at once.

Then Addison Merlo *had* sold out to the enemy, or at least had deserted, instead of making the noble gesture of self-sacrifice which had been used to explain his disappearance? If so, why had he left his own daughter behind—and what was she up to now?

It was too much for Ron Patterson, but he could agree with both of his passengers in at least one thing. Jupiter held the answer, if there *was* an answer. And if any of them lived long enough to find it...

Varie still hadn't answered Kiger's accusations about her father. But she did have still another reason which both of the men had apparently forgotten: "I may not be enough of a navigator to handle this ship, but I do know one thing. On our present course we're a sitting duck for any Martian patrol ship that happens to spot us—and you both know what that will mean!"

Ron gave in with a shrug. He moved quickly back to the pilot seat and began making the first delicate adjustments which would gradually cut in the tubes again. In any ship, the use of power to change over from free flight to another course was ticklish at best. At this speed, and in this small ship, it was toying with suicide. The slightest miscalculation would be enough to start a spin, and a spin at this speed would blow the ship apart as surely as any explosion.

RON WAS concentrating so intently on his nerve-wracking task that he didn't see the shadow edging into view on the visor plate above. He didn't hear Kiger's unruffled voice saying quietly, "Well, Varie, it was a good thought, but too late." Nor did he hear Varie's gasp as she ran to the observation port and peered out into the ebony night...

All Ron knew was the sudden jolt, the reaction in his controls and the slight lurch as if they had brushed something. Instinctively he cut the tubes, incredulously his eyes leapt to the visor screen.

Then he knew. The jolt had come from powerful magnetic grapples, and they had been picked off in mid-flight as easily as any fly by a swallow!

Ron's immediate reaction was to reach for the tube controls again. But a deeper instinct stayed his hand. It would only mean even quicker death to attempt to break loose, and their attacker was obviously a ship large enough and powerful enough to withstand such a tactic.

The same caution prompted him now to knock down the Lethoray in Varie's hand as he shoved in beside her at the observation port. "Don't be a chump, girl! You'll only blow a hole in our own side!"

He looked out, shielding his eyes. The enormous hulk of the attacking ship loomed alongside and above, like some giant space liner conveying a tiny lifeboat.

"Martian patrol," muttered Eric Kiger, peering over his shoulder.

Ron nodded a bit uncertainly. True, from what he could see—identification lights, the grim color of the hull, the general lines—it looked like one of the Mars patrol cruisers. Yet, it was surprising that it had been able to overtake the K-3 so easily. It was also surprising that they had not merely

shot the K-3 down as they had warned, instead of risking contamination in this manner.

Even as he wondered, Ron could feel the slight bumps as the little K-3 was jockeyed into position so that its side port lined up with the airseal hatch in the side of the larger ship. There were faint thuds as the seal-plate was dogged down tight, and then the scratching sound as a vibroamplifier was adjusted against the outside face of their cabin door.

"Open up in there! Open up, or we'll blast you open!"

The voice convinced Ron. But Varie Merlo raised her Lethoray again, pointing it at the port.

"Hold it!" Ron yelled, jumping to grab the gun from her hand. "They're Martians! Didn't you get that accent?"

Varie struggled with him, screaming a warning, but it was too late. Already Eric Kiger, apparently convinced by the high thin voice which had hailed them, had pulled down on the master release of the port opening. The door swung out, and the next second their captors swarmed in over them.

Ron, still struggling to grab Varie's weapon, had one glimpse of the creature who chopped down at him with the butt end of a giant-sized blaster. He wore a Martian uniform, sure. But no uniform could ever hide the greenish, brute features nor the matted hair pelt of a Jupe.

## CHAPTER V

IT WAS an effort to get his eyes open, and torture to face the light which beat down on him from above. Ron found himself staring up at the smooth, glaring metal ceiling of a small cabin. That, and the foul atmosphere, was enough to tell Ron that he was aboard the Jupe ship.

He groaned and pushed himself up on his elbows. Varie Merlo sat against the bulkhead directly behind him; knees drawn up and eyes blank. "Nice going, Patterson."

"We're alive aren't we? If you'd used that gun we wouldn't be."

"And that would have been bad?" she demanded bitterly. "Worse than this?"

"While there's life there's hope." He grinned, but already his own eyes were tracing hopelessly the gleaming, unbroken metal lining of their cell. The compartment was completely bare, only a fine crack outlined the one door set flush in the wall.

He glanced up at that glaring ceiling again. The white metal itself shed the harsh light which illuminated the room; obviously some luminous substance had been fused with the alloy itself.

"Radioactive," Varie took the unpleasant thought from his head. "Thanks just the same, but I still would have preferred a nice quick shot from a blaster."

Ron nodded slowly. He had heard of the "built-in light" which the Jupes used for illumination, radiations which meant slow death to any Earthman forced to long exposure. The Jupes themselves, through necessity, had developed a racial tolerance of radioactives far beyond that of the other races.

"What happened to Kiger?"

Varie shrugged. "They came and got him a little while ago. You've been out for nearly half an hour."

Ron rubbed his throbbing skull and tried to think. He could feel the pulse of the drive through the deck plates; obviously they were underway. But to where... and how long would it take? And what were they being saved for?

Varie had risen and was pacing the confines of their narrow prison. Her flimsy garment had suffered further

damage in the struggle, but she was as far beyond false modesty as she was from feminine hysteria. Ron looked at her with reluctant admiration, just as she turned and fixed him with that same frown of deliberation.

"Patterson, I've been thinking. I may have been wrong about you, and—"

Much as Ron wanted to hear what she had to say, he cut her off with a sharp hiss of warning. His ears had caught the grate of a bolt being pulled back on the door. As it swung inward, he stretched out on the floor again, feigning unconsciousness.

He felt the rush of air as the door was opened, he heard the thud of something—or someone—dropping to the deck near him. He gathered himself for action, and then heard Varie's voice, casual but with a note of warning underneath:

"Come out of it, Patterson! I think our friends want a word with you."

He opened his eyes and then climbed hastily to his feet. A bearded Jupe stood over him, blaster already raised for a brutal jab. Another stood in the doorway, also armed and ready for trouble. Kiger lay at his feet on the deck, unconscious and apparently drugged.

As the Jupe prodded him out, Ron threw one last glance over his shoulder. He realized now that Varie had saved him from a foolish move, as well as a brutal beating, and his eyes tried to reassure her.

"Good luck," she murmured softly.

**HIS** SILENT guards led him through the bowels of the huge ship to the bridge, and Ron quickly realized how futile any show of resistance would be. The ship fairly bristled with crew members, all armed and all going about their duties with that sullen, mechanical apathy which seemed characteristic. Their language

was English, but so archaic as to seem almost foreign.

The Captain was a superior version of the same pattern. He, too, was huge and squat, and his resplendent uniform failed to hide the thick coat of coarse black hair. But a gleam of intelligence, a nasty sort of humor, showed in his pale amber eyes. He obviously prided himself as a gentleman and a scholar, and he spoke the modern dialect.

He waved the guards aside and indicated a bench. "Sit down, my friend. No reason why you shouldn't be comfortable, at least for the moment."

Ron sat, but his eyes strayed irresistibly to the visor screen at the forward end of the bridge. It was in the form of a globe, and Ron saw that they were in space as soon as he had oriented himself to the four-dimensional projection. Behind this, the leading ship, stretched a line of similar ships in perfect formation.

The Jupe Captain had followed his glance. "Mission accomplished, as you Earthmen say. We're on our way home." He smiled smugly.

"What do you want with me?"

The Captain's eyes narrowed at the contempt in his prisoner's voice. "Let's say I just want to gloat a bit. Also to thank you. I understand, from the information I extracted from your fellow prisoner, that you're the chap who planted the seeds for us, so to speak."

This, to Ron, was the final bitterness. Being thanked by the enemy himself! If it were to mean special consideration he didn't want it; but any information he could provoke might still prove useful.

"Perhaps my 'planting' days aren't over," he told the Jupe leader sardonically. "Your ship has already been contaminated by mere contact with us."

"Ah!" the Captain waved a contemptuous hand. "You still don't understand, you Earthmen with all your

supposed superiority?"

He hesitated and then went on, apparently unable to resist the opportunity to boast. "The orange fungus, my stupid friend, was a little surprise created in our own laboratories. Perfectly harmless—until stimulated by a certain radio-pulse of a frequency which your monitors couldn't even detect. Then, as you have learned so well, the culture propagates itself beyond all control."

He smiled again. "Creating that synthetic culture was easy to us. Transplanting it without detection was another matter, since we know your security screen is sensitive to the approach of even a scout ship from Jupiter. And that's where you were so helpful, my friend, you and your expedition to Callisto! We deliberately jammed your controls, forced you to a landing on Jupiter, and then let you 'escape' with the seeds that did the damage.

"The rest was easy. Our ships patrolled just out of detection range, each of them equipped with the special transmitter which stimulates the fungus culture. By the time you woke up to the danger of that pretty little orange plant, it was too late. And now, with Earth helpless, the other planets will be easy."

**R**ON NODDED slowly. "You've destroyed the center of all civilization—and what good will it do you?"

The Captain shrugged. "In time, of course, we will take over. In perhaps a year by your time—when the blight has completely spent itself."

"War has never accomplished anything," answered Ron. "We learned that on Earth two centuries ago."

"Two centuries ago," said the Captain bitterly, "a certain ancestor of my own enjoyed all the benefits of that civilization which you hold so

high. He contributed to it. He was a scientist, a great scientist—and for that crime alone he and his family were banished to what was then known as the farthest hell-spot of space!”

Ron shook his head again, confused by the conflict in his own mind. He could even sympathize with this bitter exile-race, and that was the trouble. As Kiger had pointed out, objectivity is of dubious value when you're fighting for life itself. Ron wondered to himself whether that, in the last analysis, wasn't why Earth itself had fallen. With two centuries of peace had also come the emotional complacency which had made them so vulnerable. But *had* it been peace?

So Ron pondered as the Captain glared at him triumphantly, and then aloud he thought his way through the problem. "Captain, Jupiter has always been a blot on the conscience of every thinking man on Earth. Our trouble was that we didn't face our own guilt squarely; we tried to solve a wrong by forgetting it. Now our own injustice has come home to roost."

The Captain grinned vindictively.

"But you and your people are wrong, too. We can't blame you for being bitter; but we can blame you for pursuing the same course of destruction which can lead only to further warfare and suffering. If Jupiter had ever been willing to lay aside her arms and submit to the Interplanetary Council, instead of blindly following a leader like Ivar—"

"Ivar the Great," intoned the Captain, making the automatic gesture of obsequiousness which had become a ritual on Jupiter.

"Ivar the great fraud!" retorted Ron involuntarily. "A cheap, crooked dictator—a relic of the dark ages of two centuries ago! You will never—"

The Captain lunged at him, the greenish cast of his skin almost purple with wrath. A huge paw smashed

across Ron's face before he could get to his feet, and he went over backward. He scrambled to his feet again, ready to fight it out now on even terms, but already two of the guards had seized his arms, and others had leveled their sidearms.

It was as if Ron had uttered a blasphemy and every man within hearing had been instantly galvanized into a reflex action. As he was held, helpless, the Captain smashed his open hand again across Ron's face.

Dazed and stunned, Ron heard the command, saw the gleam of the hypodermic in the hand of one of the guards. And he heard the Juve Captain's voice, still shaking with rage:

"This one we'll save for the Leader himself."

Then, although he struggled against it, the sharp bite of the needle...and quick oblivion.

THERE WAS no dazzling light beating down on him when he awoke this time. There was only chill darkness, and the acrid stench of ammonia clutching like fingers at his raw throat. Ron sat up, choking, and a sympathetic voice muttered from the darkness near him: "You'll get used to it, chum. Breathe shallowly, and don't try to fight it."

Ron looked around, his eyes blinking and adjusting to the gloom. There were other dim forms beyond the Earthman who had spoken to him; at least fifty of them, all sitting as he was like silent statues of despair. Far beyond a corridor gleamed with luminous overhead light, and against the light were the vertical lines of the thick bars which formed their prison.

For it *was* a prison, Ron realized quickly. A prison dungeon on Jupiter, to judge from the ammonia-tainted atmosphere, and even as he thought

this, his nearest neighbor spoke again:

"Welcome to the slave pens of Jupiter, friend. What good fortune landed you here?"

Ron answered simply, matching the irony in the other's voice, that he had been picked up by one of the Jupe patrol ships and was not here by choice. The other man seemed anxious for conversation, unlike the rest of the glum lot, and Ron quickly learned all that he knew.

His name was Deglen, he had been a radionics technician, second class, and he had been captured, like most of the men in this particular pen, by a Jupe patrol ship which had landed in New Chicago.

"We didn't have anything to fight with," Deglen explained apologetically. "New Chicago had already been practically wiped up by some sort of a damned fungus, and—"

"I know," Ron interrupted dryly. "I came from Capitola, where it all started. The Jupes apparently have destroyed every city on earth—but what I don't understand is what they want with us here."

Deglen didn't know, and apparently none of the nearby prisoners either knew or cared beyond the fact that it couldn't be for anything pleasant. Ron, still weak but restless, got up and picked his way among the squatting men with Deglen following. He found that still another pen, with another group of Earth prisoners, bordered on theirs—and like all prisons, this one had a grapevine.

Some of the first arrivals had already learned the answer, to their sorrow. They had already been put to work, making repairs and cleaning out generating plants which had grown too hot even for the Jupes themselves! The Jupe civilization, as Ron already knew, was based on the

crude and dangerous atomics of uranium fission. It was practically automatic, of course—but still there came the inevitable failures and breakdowns which could be remedied only by human hands. By the human hands of slaves who could be ruthlessly sacrificed!

"But that only means a slow and horrible death!" Ron protested. "Why haven't you refused, resisted—at least, sabotaged at every opportunity? Death from a blaster would be better than that."

"You'll see," came the hopeless whisper from the next cell. "Your chance will come, and then you'll understand."

The man moved away from the bars on the other side, and behind him his new friend Deglen nudged him sharply, and then Ron turned to find that two Jupe guards were at the gate of his cell.

"Patterson!" came the guttural command. "Show yourself, you who are called Patterson."

Ron hesitated, but one of the guards had already raised his wide-mouth blaster. "Patterson! We give you five, or we fire."

Deglen sucked in an unsteady breath, whispered anxiously. "Answer, chum! If you don't, it's curtains for all of us. They've already cleaned out one block, just because somebody blew his top and cursed a guard."

"One... Two... Three..."

Ron straightened his shoulders and made his way quickly to the gate.

## CHAPTER VI

JUPITER—the city itself—nestled deep in a pock mark on the face of a scarred planet. Here once the irresistible surge of a glacier had once met the boiling inferno of a



volcano; and here in the crater left by that titanic explosion the Jupes had built their only city.

Ron had heard the rumors on Earth, the legends passed down by the armchair explorers, but the cruel fantastic beauty which spread before his eyes now was beyond any Earthman's imagination.

His escorts had led him up from the dungeon deeps along endless spiralling passageways, until now they were passing through the streets of the city itself. Streets which in themselves still spiralled upward, as Ron's eyes and lungs and lagging steps told him. The entire city was laid out vertically, level after level, up and around the walls of the inverted cone which held it.

And at the very top, arching from rim to rim of the towering crater walls, was a translucent roof! Or rather, Ron decided as he craned his neck upward and studied its shimmering substance, a visible force-field. Some sort of an almost tangible transmitted barrier, obviously designed for protection against the sudden ammonia storms and the frigid temperatures of the Jupiter night.

Ron remembered only too vividly his one previous night on Jupiter. Only the heat from his idling blast tubes had been sufficient to save him. And now he could see too the advantages of this site for the Jupiter stronghold. Undoubtedly a lava bed still bubbled far underground, and these steep cliffs held in its heat. Also there was only that one opening, the very top of the crater itself, to cover for complete protection.

Ron's weary body was growing weaker, and the guard behind prodded him impatiently. But still they climbed. Terrace after ascending terrace the city clung to the encircling cliffs. Ron wished that the engineering genius which had laid it out had

also provided lifts, and then they came into a level where there were vertical elevator shafts at regular intervals. The air was cleaner here, away from the ammonia fumes which had settled to the bottom of the valley, and the buildings more elegant. He got some idea of the prevailing caste system from that and from the different appearance of the citizens they passed. He also guessed where his guides might be taking him.

Finally there remained but one level higher—and this was a white gleaming structure cantilevered far out into the void overhead. A guard challenged them as they entered a shaft hewn out of the cliff-rock itself. Then they were whisked upward, to pass by more guards. And then finally, out across a terrace which jutted out into space. Ron caught one breathtaking glimpse of the city spread out far below in a closed spiral. Then the guard shoved him roughly in through an opening of the transparent walls of the building itself, and Ron knew they had arrived at last.

**T**HEY WERE in the aerie of the king eagle himself—the roost from which Ivar the Great surveyed his kingdom as from the top of an inverted ant's nest!

Ron's head swam at first with the sheer barbaric magnificence of it all. An enormous hall, walled on three sides only by angled panes of crystal-clear glastic. Reflecting surfaces on the ceiling above reflected the city below, showing the whole dizzy panorama of which he had just caught a glimpse.

His own guards had stopped at the sacred threshold, but now the court guards had taken him in hand and were shoving him toward the throne raised high against the inner wall. He stumbled, and then a sudden blow

from behind sent him sprawling on the thick carpeting. He tried to get up again, only to be knocked down again by another vicious blow.

"Bow, Earth-worm! Bow to the Leader!"

"Ivar, our Leader! Ivar the Great!" came the automatic chorus from the assembled throng.

Ron raised his head cautiously this time. From his throne above, the Dictator of Jupiter leered down at him. He was black-bearded and tremendous in frame, easily the size of two ordinary humans. His powerful body was clothed in tight-fitting, shiny black; with a thin braid of metallic gold spiralling around it in symbolic representation of the city he ruled.

The Jupes flanking his throne were likewise uniformed in black, but with only a tiny gold spiral on each chest. Obviously they were the nobles of his court; the syncophants which waited on every word of the great Ivar. And there were women present too—young women of smooth skin who could have only been captured slaves, judging from the heavy-boned and hairy Jupe females Ron had sighted on the streets.

Each of them was dressed only in the sheerest of filmy tunics, but their trance-like attitude gave them an unreal quality, like marble statues.

"Well," demanded Ivar with a harsh chuckle. "Have you filled your eyes, Earthman? And are you still so contemptuous of the outcasts who laid you low?"

Ron grinned. A slow, mocking grin that he couldn't resist. "Corny," he said. "You're at least six centuries behind the times, old man."

For a moment there was a stunned, incredulous silence. Then some black-garbed flunkey barked a command, and one of the guards sprang forward with a raised gun.

"Hold!" roared Ivar's voice above the uproar, and the scene froze again. Then he gestured with one hand, "Bring out the others!"

Ron stared as they were led in from a door to one side. Eric Kiger and Varie Merlo! Varie was dressed now in one of those rainbow-thin gowns, every line of her beautiful body on public display, but she seemed completely indifferent.

Ivar's eyes gleamed as they fell on her, and his black-bearded visage parted in a smile. "Well, another jewel for our crown! Come here, my pretty!"

**O**BEDIENTLY Varie climbed the steps of the dias, sat down on the indicated seat next to the throne. She looked straight ahead, ignoring Ron's stricken eyes, not even flinching at the rough hand which stroked her slender arm carelessly.

"And what about this one?" Ivar's nod indicated Kiger, who stood trembling in his guard's grasp.

The guard shoved, and Kiger stumbled forward desperately trying to hold himself with dignity. "I am Eric Kiger, your Majesty. Leader of the Earth Council. I was on my way to negotiate a peace when your cruiser picked us up."

"Negotiate!" Ivar slapped his knee with a roar of scorn. "Negotiate, you say!"

"I am Eric Kiger," repeated the other desperately. "*Eric Kiger*. Surely that name means something to you, your Majesty!"

"If it does, I've forgotten it," the Jupe Leader said, roaring again at his own wit. "All right, away with him."

"But—"

"Ah, you feel you deserve special treatment—is that it?"

Kiger nodded eagerly, any trace of his former courage dissolved with

fear. "Yes, your Majesty. You know full well what part I played—"

"Silence!" roared Ivar and chuckled again. "All right, Eric Kiger, you shall have special consideration. You shall receive your reward from the prettiest hand I've seen in many a year." He turned to Varie Merlo by his side, handed her something which his huge, hairy palm hid from view. "Give it to your friend, my dear! Right between the eyes!"

Frozen with unbelief, Ron watched. Varie slowly raised the hand which now held a tiny jewelled air-gun, deliberately took aim and just as deliberately pulled the trigger. Kiger fell, his own death rattle choking off his cry of protest.

Ron was already hurling himself forward, but once again a blow from the guard behind sent him sprawling. Again a blaster was raised, ready for the command, but again Ivar raised his hand.

"This one has too much spunk. It would be a shame to waste it—and end it so easily. He should make an excellent slave—as long as he lasts."

A gesture of dismissal, and Ron felt rough hands seizing him again. He caught sight of Varie once more, handing the Jupe leader back his gun with an obedient smile, and once again his anger moved him to struggle.

A great grinning guard chopped down with his pistol-butt. Ron remembered only vaguely being dragged back and tossed into the cell again—and then his exhaustion took him off into sleep.

**H**E AWOKE with a spinning head and the feeling that his mind must have suffered from the beatings he had taken. He remembered it as a nightmare...the span-flung city of Jupiter, the overlooking castle of the Leader with its strange mixture of

barbaric, medieval splendor and gleaming crystal walls. And Eric Kiger, who for some strange reason had seemed to expect mercy from the Jupe dictator...and then, Varie Merlo.

Most of all, Varie Merlo! It must have been a nightmare. Her docile acquiescence of the black-garbed Ivar's attentions, her cold-blooded murder of a fellow Earthman, her blank stranger's eyes who had looked right through him and beyond him...

Then a young Earthman whose name he knew somehow as Deglen was bending over him, and Ron came fully conscious and knew it had been no nightmare but bitter reality. Varie Merlo had sold herself and her friends out to the Jupes...there could be no other explanation.

"You all right, fellow?" Deglen was asking him.

"Fine," he answered, sitting up and burying his throbbing head in his hands. "Just fine, except for a skull that feels like it's coming off. I'd die happy if I could just get one of those black-haired sadists alone for a few minutes!"

"While there's life there's hope," Deglen said optimistically—and Ron grinned sourly to himself as he heard the echo of the words he himself had once spoken to an ice-blooded, double-crossing female named Varie Merlo.

The day—or was it the Jupiter night now?—wore on. A bucket of dry, tasteless concentrate rations was shoved through the gate by a Jupe guard. Ron gulped some down, as did his fellow-prisoners, only to keep his strength up. And washed the taste from his mouth with the hose which dripped continuously in one corner of the cell to supply their only source of water as well as their only means of sanitation.

There were never more than two Jupe guards in evidence, and once again Ron turned his thoughts to possible escape. The other prisoners seemed completely hopeless and dispirited, with the exception of Deglen, but still—given a leader and a plan...

Then Ron remembered the whispered words from the next cell: "You'll see...you'll understand..."—and he knew that the Jupes must have some devilish method of controlling their slave-labor groups. And within a very short time he had a chance to see that method in operation.

Three Jupe guards marched into the cell block, two of them armed with wide-range blasters and the third carrying a tray which seemed to be loaded with small glastic cylinders. They stopped at the adjoining pen, one armed guard and the man with the tray taking their position at the gate and the third continuing on around the outside to sweep the cell with his blaster from the rear side.

**T**HERE WERE groans and mummings from the prisoners inside, but at a threatening wave of the blaster they stumbled to their feet. The gate was chained open just wide enough so that one prisoner could exit at a time, preventing any concerted attempt to rush it, and they were gradually forced through it. As each prisoner passed through, his arm was jabbed with one of the glastic cylinders, while the second armed guard covered him with his blaster.

Staring from his side of the bars, Ron realized that the cylinders were ampules. And as each prisoner received his injection, he shuffled woodenly ahead at a word of command to join the growing line who waited in the corridor, motionless and

without any further attention from the busy guards!

Deglen had been watching over Ron's shoulder, and now he whispered the phrase that was echoing in Ron's mind: "Hypnotic serum!"

"So that's how they handle us," Ron muttered, and he understood now why the others had been so discouraged. Once injected with the drug, a man became a living robot, an automaton without any will except to obey blindly a spoken command.

Ron wondered briefly what would happen if he were to shout a command to that waiting group of human robots, but the answer was only too obvious. The blaster of the two armed guards would level their ranks before they could move.

There remained only one prisoner now in the adjoining cell. Ron couldn't see his face in the dim light, but his heart sank with pity as he made out the stooped, gaunt figure of an elderly man. Slowly he shuffled to the gate, while the guards waited impatiently, and then with sudden courage hurled himself at the Jupe with the serum ampules.

The Jupe sidestepped easily, his cohort swung his blaster around with a laugh, and the elderly one collapsed as the barrel crashed viciously against his head. Ron clenched his fists around the bars, hoping the other prisoners would only take advantage of this momentary distraction, and knowing at the same time his hope was futile. The others in the corridor still waited passively, motionless and wooden.

The Jupe with the blaster sighted on the figure at his feet, but the other one stopped him. "Put Grandpa in with these others. We can use him in the next work-party—if he's still alive by then."

The limp, pitiful figure was

dropped inside the gate of Ron's cell; the gate clanged shut again; and then at a command the group outside marched off. Fifty men with only three guards, Ron thought... but *not* men, really. Helpless, will-less automatons, they were—and so would remain until the drug had worn off. And by that time, of course, they would be back in their cell. Providing previous exposure to hot radiations hadn't already finished them off; and then his own group, the newest lot, would take their place.

The old man still lay in a heap on the stone floor, ignored by even his companions-in-distress. Ron cursed, remembering the old fellow's admirable if futile show of resistance, and hurried to his side. Behind him Deglen hesitated long enough to wet his scarf with cold water, and then bathed the wasted, leathery face as Ron supported his head.

The eyes opened, blinked up at Ron, and then he struggled.

"It's all right now, old boy. We're Earthmen, we're your friends."

"Pa—Patterson!" the old fellow gasped.

And Ron knew in the same instant that he was looking down into the lined, suffering face of the man who had once commanded a world... Addison Merlo!

## CHAPTER VII

IT WAS SOME time before he could speak more than a few disjointed phrases. Already an old man at the beginning of the orange blight, Merlo had obviously suffered greatly at the hands of the Jupes. But Ron urged him to rest, and forced a thin gruel of concentrate and water between his lips, and at length he was able to sit up.

Merlo's story was short and bit-

ter, much of it as Ron had already gathered. The ex-President had left Capitola with a picked crew in a secret and desperate attempt to trace the Creeping Death to its source. He had suspected, even then, the true nature of the blight; he had guessed that some traitor had sold out to the enemy world...

"We suspected you above all," Merlo told Ron bluntly, but with a trace of humor in his weary, pain-ridden eyes. "I can see now that we must have been wrong. Anyway, we were immediately picked up by a Jupe cruiser and then I knew for sure that we had been betrayed. Supposedly no one, with the exception of my own daughter and Eric Kiger, knew of the flight in advance."

"Kiger was your traitor," Ron said grimly, and sketched briefly what had happened since the President's disappearance, "Having accomplished his job, he was probably supposed to have been rescued by a Jupe patrol. They double-crossed him, or just conveniently forgot him, and then he had to talk me into piloting the K-3 in order to make his escape. But now...well, he's earned his just reward. I saw him die—at Ivar's own command."

"And what of my daughter?" Merlo faltered. "You said she was captured with you? Does she still live?"

Ron hesitated. Having seen the fiendish hypnotic serum at work, he knew now the explanation for Varie Merlo's submission to the Jupe leader's will. But there was no purpose in bringing further distress to this poor old man.

"As far as I know, she's still alive," Ron answered evasively. "We have to find some way of breaking out of here."

Merlo sighed. "Hopeless, Patterson. Even if we did overcome the

guards, we wouldn't get very far. And you saw what happened to my useless attempt."

Ron climbed to his feet slowly, shaking his head. "Not entirely useless, sir. It gave me an idea—and by the gods of space, we're going to make it work!"

**BY THE TIME** the guards returned, Ron's fellow prisoners had been transformed from a hopeless, defeated lot into an organized, determined group. His plan depended upon split-second timing and the self-discipline of every last man, and at first there had been protests that it would get them nothing but quick death.

"You haven't anything better to look forward too!" Ron reminded them, and then when Addison Merlo himself volunteered for the first and most crucial move, the protests died in shame.

The guards finally put in their appearance, after hours of tense waiting, and took their positions as before with the automatic precision of an old routine.

Addison Merlo was first through the gate this time, and the Jupe with the ampules chuckled harshly as he reached for his arm. "Learned your lesson, eh, old one?"

But Merlo had already stumbled, his arms flailing and sending the tray of hypodermics spilling. Quickly the other guard slammed the gate shut while the first Jupe viciously drove the pointed ampule into his arm and then sent him reeling against the corridor wall. Cursing, both Jupes at the gate then bent to retrieve the tiny cylinders. The flurry had attracted the attention of the third guard, but seeing everything apparently under control he returned to his station on the back side of the pen.

Merlo himself was now under the

drug, but his apparent awkwardness had accomplished its purpose. In the instant before the Jupe had jabbed him, his floundering hands and feet had sent perhaps half a dozen of the ampules rolling back into shadows of the cell, where they had been quickly retrieved and surreptitiously passed from hand to hand.

At least Ron had one concealed in his sweating palm now, and Deglen behind him. The gate was cracked open again, the armed guard beckoned with a wave of his blaster and a curse of warning. Ron stepped through and in one smooth motion swung his left arm out from his side. The ampule jabbed home in the bare leg of the kilted Jupe with the blaster. Simultaneously Deglen, following close on Ron's heels, had shoved his own ampule into the reaching arm of the second Jupe.

For a split second their fate held in the balance. Both Jupes had already reacted to the sudden attack, but the powerful drug took instantaneous effect. The blaster dropped again, their faces stiffened. Ron shoved his now empty ampule into one limp, unresisting hand with a sharp, low command. "Use this for every man! Continue as if nothing had happened."

And with a prayer he marched on through, to take his place woodenly by Addison Merlo. Deglen quickly followed, and behind him the rest of the prisoners one by one. The hand of the drugged Jupe rose and fell in a routine motion, his armed cohort stood by with blaster poised, the prisoners formed their usual docile line down the corridor—and to the third guard all apparently had proceeded as usual.

Ron waited with trembling tension, not daring to look around, knowing that one false move, one indication from any of them that he wasn't

drugged, would spoil the show. Then all were out, and the third guard had stepped up from behind.

"That's the last of 'em," Ron heard him mutter to his colleagues. "What's the matter with you? Let's go!"

His protest died in a gurgle as a dozen of the supposedly drugged prisoners jumped him from behind. A hand cut off his wind, another hand drove the point of an ampule into his back, and then there were three guards at their command.

Ron stepped out of line then, and quickly gave his orders. "Proceed as usual! Answer all challenges as usual. You are escorting a work-party in the usual manner. You are taking us to the airdrome. We have been ordered to clean up the patrol ships which have just returned from duty!"

The guards moved stolidly ahead. Ron surveyed his men with a last warning glance, and then went back into line between Merlo and Deglen. Just as mechanically as their escorts they moved forward, inwardly tense but outwardly just another group of obedient, robot slaves.

**THEY WOUND** through the dimly-lit underground passageway, passing several guard-posts without a hitch. Obviously of the lowest caste and lowest intelligence, the dungeon guards accepted the situation as normal without a second glance. But as they came out into the glaring brightness at last, Ron knew the crucial moment had come.

Crisp air filled their lungs, around them stretched the city rising like the walls of some enormous stadium. And Ron could hear the mutters in the ranks behind him, feel the rising restlessness. His voice carried hard and clear over his shoulder: "Steady! I'll shoot the first one who gives us away, or tries to make a break for

it!"

They subsided, their marching footsteps beat on in mechanical cadence. The few Jupes on the street passed them without a glance; obviously it was a familiar sight, and the hypnotic drug had never failed.

It hadn't failed now—with those who had been injected. Unquestioningly their doped escorts led them on, winding higher and higher on the terraced streets. Then into the mouth of a huge horizontal shaft leading straight back into the mountainside—and Ron's guess was confirmed. The Jupiter air base was an immense tunnel cut through the enclosing mountain, with the entrance shaft leading in from the city itself and its mouth, undoubtedly, opening on the far side. Thus the ships could take off and land without endangering the metropolis itself or disturbing the protective force-barrier overhead.

But the shaft itself must have some sort of a barrier to close it off, Ron thought, and almost with the thought it came into sight. A huge bulkhead of black metal had been fused across the tunnel. There was a wide door in the middle, but before that entrance was still another sentry post, with half a dozen lounging guards.

Their leading escort halted, and Ron thought that their luck had ended. They were trapped now, and facing six or seven blasters which could cut them down in a twinkling. Almost unbelievably Ron heard their doped guard answering the challenge with a parrot-like repetition of his own words:

"We have been ordered to clean up the patrol ships which have just returned from duty."

The sentry peered at the speaker curiously. "What ails you, Eno? Have these walking dead ones addled your brains?"



"We have been ordered to clean up the patrol ships—"

"All right, all right!" The sentry pulled a lever and stepped aside, with a leer at the blank-faced Earthmen. "We got some hot ones, I warrant you that."

The barrier swung open, the group marched through, and then it clanged shut behind them again. Ron took in the situation at a single glance. No guards in here—the steady blast of a sub-zero wind and the choking fumes of ammonia were explanation enough. Ahead lay the flaring mouth of the gigantic cavern, opening in a half-mile apron to the steel-gray Jupiter sky. And lined up along it, the gleaming black hulls of the Jupiter fleet.

There was no holding the men now, for they knew that they had succeeded. They broke ranks with a shout, splitting into the two groups as previously decided. Each group had an experienced navigator at its head, and members from an Earth patrol crew which the Jupes had taken prisoner as a unit.

Ron paused long enough to seize one of the blasters from the drugged, bewildered guards—and to end their perplexity forever with three short blasts. Then he raced after Deglen, who was already boarding the nearest cruiser.

A glance at the bridge controls and a word from the busy pilot reassured Ron. The set-up was quite similar to that of the old-time Earth space-ships, which one time too had depended upon "hot" atomic drives. Also, the pilot assured him, a briefing in all types of foreign ships had been included in their military instruction.

He found Deglen already at his post before a transmitter in the small radio room off the bridge, and he waited anxiously while the latter puz-

zled out the strange hookup and the unfamiliar dials.

"Okay," Deglen said finally. "I think I've got it."

"You know your orders?" Ron asked him. "Hold it for thirty minutes once you're overheard—and then give it full power if there's the slightest sign of resistance below."

Deglen nodded, but frowned. "You mean you aren't coming with us?"

Ron held up his captured blaster. "Some unfinished business—including the rest of these cruisers. Somebody's got to take care of them, or you won't get very far."

Deglen nodded slowly, his homely face splitting in a hopeful grin. He had overheard Ron's conversations with Addison Merlo, and apparently had guessed the rest.

"Good luck, fella. When you find that 'unfinished business', you can tell her her father's in the best of hands!"

## CHAPTER VIII

THE green-kilted police guards of Jupiter were, as Ron already knew, a slow-moving and dull-witted lot; sad products of the excessive inbreeding among the lower class of the Jupes. And the guard called Aguan—he who watched the single entrance shaft to the Leader's castle crag—had been chosen for brawn and blind loyalty rather than intelligence.

But now, as the first reddish shadows of night-glow crept over the cliff-city below, Aguan's loyalty suffered. He was tired and bored and stiff with cold. He resented the shouts of drunken merriment which echoed from the jutting palace balcony above. So far there had not even been the usual diversion of royal feast nights—the dropping of screaming slave girls from that far-flung parapet toward whimsical tar-

gets a thousand feet below.

Aguan had heard other sounds too, at his lonely post. A while ago the muffled thunder of several departing space cruisers, now and then the sharp sudden hiss of a blaster on the streets below. But none of this was Aguan's concern. His only worry was the arrival of his relief; and he turned now at a movement behind, thinking his man had come. But instead came the brief flare of a blaster...and then Aguan's worries had ended eternally.

But for the Earthman who darted past his shriveled remains, trouble had only begun. Already, Ron knew, the alarm must have spread from his swift encounters on the levels below. And now as he gained the elevator shaft, his ears caught sound of the revelry above. He could guess its meaning—a victory celebration by Ivar and his assembled leaders. And what could one do, armed even with a blaster, against that mob?

But still he pressed the lever that would take him straight up into the stronghold of Jupiter might...

The guard at the top of the shaft looked up listlessly. He was slumped out sprawling against the glittering wall of marcasite tile; obviously some of the festive liquor had found its way down his throat. As his bleary eyes focussed on Ron and at last registered, he tried to rise. But already Ron's hands were at his throat and after a moment of struggle he slumped again.

Cautiously Ron crept through the dusk across the terrace, hugging the inner wall as he worked his way toward the brightly lit, transparent shell of the palace. Hot fury gripped him as he peered in, but cold reason stayed his hand on the blaster trigger. One gun alone could never command that sprawling scene of orgy.

A banquet table had been laid the

enormous length of this central hall. It had once been heaped with steaming platters and brimming bowls, but now one section had been overturned and the rest of it was in shambles. The Jupe war lords were scattered from one end to the other, some sprawled in drunken stupor on the floor, others pursuing their pleasure with screaming, struggling slave girls.

**R**ON SICKENED as he realized that these captives had not been doped, so that their terror and feeble struggles might only add to inhuman sport. Even as he watched in horror, one torn and desperate maiden broke loose from her pursuer and ran through the open panel just beyond Ron. Frantically she dashed along the terrace, seeking a way out as her drunken tormentor followed.

Ron raised his blaster, unable any longer to count the cost, but already it was too late. The Jupe had cornered the girl at the far edge, and in her last desperate attempt to escape his clutching fingers she stumbled backward over the low balustrade. Her scream echoed thinly from below; the Jupe chuckled brutally and turned back in for another; and Ron with an effort slowly lowered the gun in his clenched fist.

With loathing he turned his eyes inside again, seeking a point of attack where he might at least stand a chance. Time was growing short; already he could hear the faint drone of a ship in the distance...

His eyes at last found Ivar, the giant Jupe leader in his gilt-spiralled uniform of symbolic black. Ivar, too, was roaring drunk and likewise having his sport. A slim, white-skinned figure, clad in the revealing slave robe, struggled in his hairy arms. She fought desperately and broke free—only to be seized by other rough hands and tossed back to the center

of the group.

Time and time again she almost got away, but always to be shoved back again with a roar of savage laughter. Ron caught one glimpse of her face, the stricken, lovely face of Varie Merlo. Then his self-control broke, and he started forward. He couldn't hope to get all of them, but Ivar at least would feel the first blast and Varie would have the grim satisfaction of sharing his own quick death.

But as Ron gathered himself at the open entrance, he hesitated again. Apparently Ivar had tired of the sport, or else had been reminded of his duty by the uniformed officer who had just whispered in his ear. He raised his hand now for attention, and the uproar quickly subsided.

"Belay for a moment, my friends! Your leader must toss a bone to his people."

There was a cynical laughter and a few grumbles, but obediently even the drunkest of the lot staggered to their feet and filed out behind their commander, who was heading straight for the wide entrance where Ron still hesitated!

Ron ducked back hastily, taking shelter again against the shadowed rampart at the rear. Overhead suddenly the arched barrier glowed into light, flooding the entire bowl of the city with an illumination stronger than that of day. Ron shrank back still further, fearing that he would be spotted, but all eyes were on the huge figure of Ivar as he stepped to the edge of the balcony. He began to speak, and as his mighty voice rolled back from the surrounding cliffs Ron realized that some hidden amplifying device was bringing his words to every ear in the city below.

"People of Jupiter! Your Leader speaks!"

**B**ACK CAME the echo of thousands of voices. "Ivar, our Leader! Ivar the Great!" From where he was, Ron could not see over the edge but he could picture the multitude gathering on the winding streets below, like ants pouring from a teeming hill.

"People of Jupiter, we have won the mighty victory I promised you but a short time ago. Earth has fallen, and her allied planets are isolated. The System is ours!"

Back came the dutiful echo, "Ivar our Leader," but it sounded hollow and unenthusiastic to Ron. "So what?" it seemed to ask. "What benefit to us?"

Apparently the war lords sensed this too, for they stirred uneasily and Ivar's harsh voice boomed out again with great promises of their future as the master race.

But Ron, crouching in his corner, no longer listened! Now if ever was his chance, for not only were Ivar's top commanders clustered about him, but even the guards and servants of the palace had gathered to hear their Leader's words.

He could, Ron knew now, destroy that whole evil crew with one quick, steady sweep of his weapon. Except for one thing—and the only reason his finger hesitated on the trigger. Varie Merlo was in the center of that group, held securely by two Jupe officers, her head hanging limp with exhaustion. The other captives had been herded away, and even as Ron wondered for what purpose she had been brought out here, Ivar's gloating conclusion provided the horrible answer.

The Jupe leader turned and seized Varie, shoving her roughly toward the balcony edge before him. He held her there, poised, while his cohorts spread out closer to the edge and his voice carried down to the craning

multitude below.

"Your Leader is grateful, oh people of Jupiter! He gives you our fairest captive—daughter of the once-mighty ruler of Earth itself! Take her—and see for yourselves how our enemies have fallen!"

Cold horror had seized Ron as he realized Ivar's intention of sending Varie hurtling to her death in the depths below. He knew he could never reach her in time, and now heedless fury tightened his trigger finger. The blaster swung, covering the long balcony before him with a sheet of flame that melted all who stood in its path. The first went down without even turning, the last had time only for a scream or a futile step before the arc reached them—until there was only black Ivar himself.

Ron's finger lightened at the last instant as his sights swung to their final target. For Ivar had whirled, pulling back Varie and holding her in front of him in instinctive self-protection.

**F**OR A second they faced each other, and Ivar read his advantage in Ron's hesitation. He edged toward the exit shaft, still holding Varie as a shield before him. She struggled feebly, but her strength was gone and the Jupe held her slender form as easily as a doll.

"Shoot, Ron!" she gasped, and her voice was a sob.

Ron hurled himself forward, dropping the blaster which could only reach Ivar at the cost of the girl's life. The Jupe hurled her aside too, as he met Ron's lunge. He grinned derisively as he braced himself to grapple, knowing full well that the Earthman would be no match for his massive strength.

But Ron knew it too; knew that only skill and speed could save him. His fists lashed inside the Jupe's

wide-spread arms; a left and a right and then he weaved away again. Ivar shook his bearded head, hardly hurt, and clumsily tried to close again.

But still Ron circled around, landing blow after blow which the Jupe tried awkwardly to guard as he lumbered after his elusive foe.

It was a savage, silent fight to the finish. Neither of them saw Varie as she pulled herself up, stumbled over to Ron's discarded weapon. Ron didn't even hear her frantic cry for him to get out of range; he knew only that hated, massive target and the numb satisfaction of his bleeding fists.

For the Jupe was beginning to tire of a game in which he couldn't even come to grips with his agile opponent. Debauchery had made Ivar soft; his wind was short and the Earthman's blows were beginning to tell. He stumbled angrily forward like a wounded bull, not realizing in his wrath that he was being led always closer to the yawning edge of the terrace itself.

"Now, Ron!" came Varie's scream. "Get back!"

But if Ron heard her at all, her meaning was lost. The lust for blood pounded in his aching body. He saw Ivar with his back to the rail, he pounded in again with the last desperate strength he could muster. The Jupe staggered back against the balustrade, trying to dodge... stumbled blindly, and then went on over as Ron's right fist crashed into his jaw.

Panting and dazed, Ron stared over the edge. Dumbly he watched as Ivar's figure fell twisting through space, a sprawling, falling beetle in the bright glare of the radiant overhead bowl. In a trance of exhaustion his eyes followed it all the way down, until at last it was a tiny blot against one of the shining streets below—and

the center of a converging mob of ant-like figures.

Then he shook himself out of it, at a sudden touch on his arm. He looked around and saw Varie, the blaster still trembling in her hand. He heard the nearing drone of the cruiser circling overhead beyond the lighted barrier, and he knew that there was still much to be done.

"You stand guard," he told the girl, nodding toward the rear of the balcony. "We can hold them off indefinitely, as long as you cover that elevator shaft."

Then, with a wry grin for the fate that had put him in this exalted position, he turned once more toward the waiting, wondering city of Jupiter.

"People of Jupiter!"

**HIS WORDS** rolled back from the surrounding cliffs, like the mighty voice of a prophet.

"People of Jupiter, an Earthman speaks! Your leader, Ivar, has fallen. You saw him fall, and you can look upon his broken body with joy and without fear. He lies down there in the gutter where he belongs. His war lords lie dead about me, here on the palace balcony. You know the truth of what I say, by the mere fact that I am able to say it."

Behind him, Ron heard the sharp, reassuring spit of the blaster in Varie's hand. He glanced over his shoulder, saw that she was holding her post, and then continued.

"People of Jupiter, your tyrant spoke truly when he said that Earth had fallen. The cities of Earth have been destroyed—by a secret weapon which you yourselves created. But now, unless you choose otherwise, that same weapon can bring you the same misery and destruction. Here somewhere in your city is the laboratory which spawned that weapon.

Overhead you can hear the sound of one of your own cruisers, but one manned by Earthmen. One flick of a switch on that ship will set your own weapon in action against you; one sign of resistance and you all will perish.

"But we do not believe that you want to die. We do not believe that you want war and death and starvation. We need your help and your resources to help restore the mother planet which is home to all of us. I promise you, that with your peaceful cooperation it *can* become your home again.

"We, the men of Earth, have spoken. We can give you peace, and freedom, and justice for all. Or we can give you death, even as your leaders did us. You can believe what I say, by the mere fact that I trouble to say it when your position is helpless...

"Peace or death? The choice is yours!"

Ron waited, and in the waiting silence it seemed he could hear the muted murmur of ten thousand voices whispering in sudden hope.

He spoke again: "If your choice is peace, follow this command. Choose your own delegates. One from each level, high and low alike. Let them come to this fallen throne of tyranny, where henceforth all shall be heard on equal terms."

He leaned over the edge, looking down and across into the sea of uplifted faces. There was still the great, incredulous silence; the wondering unbelief of hopes which have at last been set free.

Then one distant voice was lifted: "Peace... Peace!" And others joined in—and more—until the swelling chant filled the hollow bowl of the city and the echoes reached the sky.

And over it all, one lone Earthman stood looking down, musing the des-

tiny which had fallen to him. Thinking of the task of bringing justice where tyranny had flourished before; thinking of the eternal vigilance needed where treachery had ruled so long. And thinking, too, of the bright

new Earth which could someday rise again from the ruins of the old...

Then he turned to Varie, saw shining in her face the light that would sustain him on the long, dark road ahead.

## WANNA BUY A BRAIN?

★

By MILTON MATTHEW

★

**T**HE BIG AUTOMATIC calculating machines are reproducing like rabbits, it now appears. There are now a half dozen companies engaged in producing smaller versions of the big boys so that a lot of "littler" problems can be solved, problems which don't warrant the attentions of the super mechanical thinkers.

These little "automatic Brains" are something like a large television set in appearance, but they are considerably more complex as well as having the ponderous name of "electronic differential analyzer" tacked on them.

What they can do is essentially this: there are many problems whose answer need be known only approximately, say to

two or three decimal places. Complex machines aren't required for this sort of problem solving, so the smaller machine fills the bill.

The way in which the machines work is easy to understand too. It converts quantities in a problem (like temperature pressure or the odds on Smoky Joe in the Fourth at Hialeah) into electrical voltages. Then by operating on these voltages, according to pre-determined rules, the answer comes spilling out in the form of a wavy trace on the screen of a cathode ray tube.

These machines will be invaluable in industry, though eventually the industrious home mechanic will get around to building one. They always do.

## ARE WE SLIPPING?

★

By SANDY MILLER

★

**T**WO ANNOUNCEMENTS from Great Britain have sent a number of American observers into a dither. We are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as being right up in front when it comes to science and invention. But these two tales make us pause and re-examine our situation.

One: the British are building jet-powered transports. We are not. We don't even have them on the drawing boards.

Two: the British are sending on a tour, a jet (actually, a gas turbine) powered automobile. We have not yet built one.

Now what do these two things mean?

American technology ordinarily doesn't lag in anything. That's easily shown by our standard of living. But could it be possible, a number of thoughtful persons are asking, that we are getting too cocky? Is it possible that Americans are resting on their laurels? God forbid that this should be the case!

But the sad fact is that when both of these inventions were discussed with American aircraft and automotive experts, they calmly dismissed the importance of them with a casual, "we haven't the time to bother," so to speak!

This is certainly no way to speak. We can't afford not to be right in the tech-

nological thick of things. Both of these developments are of extreme importance. They are the future transportation methods of the world—and we haven't even started.

Gas turbine powered automobiles are simpler, more efficient, more powerful, more flexible than the conventional reciprocating type. Jet powered transports are the natural order of things.

If the British make a successful go of both these new exploitations, American sales and prestige the world over will go down. Can we afford this? The answer is no!

Right now, most of the world's airlines use American planes, powerful, safe, reliable.

Right now, American automobiles are the best in the world.

But this won't always be so unless we keep producing new ideas and developing them as they come forth from the research laboratories.

Fortunately, a fair number of important figures are conscious of this strange apathy and inertia on the part of American manufacturers and are trying to do something about it. They'd better succeed. We don't want the Maginot-line type of American mentality.



# FORBIDDEN FRUIT



"Stop it!" he shouted. "Don't you realize they know everything we're doing!"



## By Roger Flint Young

**All plans, all safeguards didn't mean a thing to this woman when she made up her mind to seek new and forbidden thrills . . .**

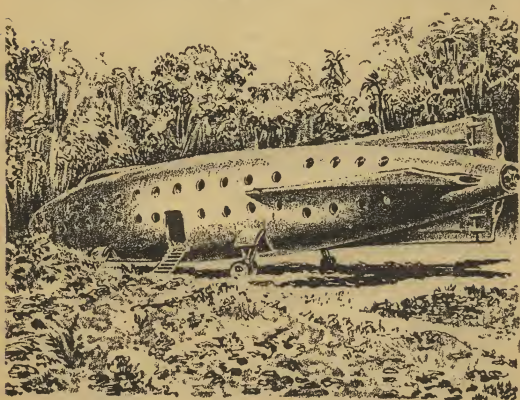
MARNER got to his feet, stretched, then clicked off the psychaudio player. It had been a good recording, good enough to make him grateful for such devices to help kill the monotony of waiting and waiting and waiting—

Not that there wasn't enough to do on the big ship. Everything was carefully planned for them. Still, just the knowledge that this was the waiting period, the travel time; that nothing

could really begin until they reached their destination— He shrugged off the thought, reminded himself that a moment before he had felt very good about things.

He turned to his wife. "Any way you look at it," he told her, reassuring himself, "we have it pretty soft here. Think of what they're going through back in the mother system."

Iv looked at him, questioningly. Marner waited for her to speak, then,



when she didn't, turned his head away. He didn't like it when she looked at him like that, not really seeing his face as she tried to peer at something beneath the surface.

He turned back to her, words close to his lips, when she switched on the scanscreen. He was silent as she manipulated the controls. Her busy fingers could bring the pictures and the sound from any portion of the great ten mile long spaceship. Except for the individual privacy squares, and, of course, the respected living and working quarters of the nobility, no portion of the ship could be hidden from the scanscreens. Any of the thousand Charter Colonists could be seen and heard, and any of their children and children's children.

"Look!"

Marner looked, wondering about the sharpness of his wife's tone of voice.

They saw the colonists on the screen. Singly, in little groups, in larger groups, they went about the process of living. Call it, Marner thought, *waitful* living. There was the studying, of course, and the practice in the art and science of adaptation and self-preservation. It was needful; no longer would new worlds see colonists who could not survive.

Life on the ship, Marner repeated to himself, was near perfect. The climate was controlled; and there was climate: hot days, invigorating nights. The food was varied, delicious, wholesome, completely nutritious and— One seldom thought of it as synthetic. The only hazards and perils to face were well planned, and there was never any real danger. Under the benevolent rule of the lords and ladies strife and friction were held to a minimum.

MARNER shook his head helplessly, turned to his wife and saw the hint of a pout on her lips. Her impatient gesture stopped him from be-

ginning to itemize their blessings.

"Look at them out there," she said. "Nothing but happiness. The<sup>e</sup> smug happiness of kept animals. Where's the adventure of life, the romance, and the dangers of— Just one day after the other. They—and we—eat the same foods, breathe the same laundered and germ-free air. Day in and forever out."

"Darling." He said it softly, pleading with her.

"I've seen the records. So have you. You know they *lived* in the mother system! There was freedom and uncertainty! There was death as well as life!"

He pulled her close to him, not looking into the blazing violet eyes. "We're here, darling. There's nothing we can do about it." He stroked her tawny hair, pressing his hand down so there would be a little hurt in the gesture. "And it won't be forever. Flight Control announced we're close to the halfway point. Some day we'll be out of the ship, in a world of our own."

He felt her head go down, rest against his chest. "That's what makes it so— We'll be old, then. There won't be much left for us."

"We'll have some years," Marner insisted. "And we'll have children, then."

He felt the spasms of her body as she wept.

THE SOFT note of a chime sounded, hung in the air. Marner held his wife close to him, and they were still, unmoving.

Marner knew that all through the ship activity was coming to a halt, except for that which was essential to vital ship functions. The sleeping were being aroused.

A few moments later and a voice filled the room, as it filled the ship, seeming to come from no one point. The tone of the voice was full and rich, self-assured. There was the note

of confidence in it that came from the speaker knowing that he was born to help rule, as were his ancestors for twenty generations before him.

"Colonists and members of the crew: We approach the star system that marks the half-way point in our trip. Even as the launchers foresaw, our propulsion grids approach their half-life. As you know, failure could come at any moment after the half-life has been reached.

"We must have mass as we replace the grids. Therefore we have selected a planet of this star system for a landing. The Captain had been instructed to approach the planet, match its gravity-time, then bring the ship to rest.

"During our stay on the planet the walls of the ship will be given transparency. Classes will be suspended. All colonists will have the privilege—and the duty—of inspecting through the walls of the ship the planet area adjacent to our resing site."

The chime sounded again, one quick note, swiftly muffled. The message was signed as complete, and normal ship operations were expected to be resumed.

Marnar turned to his wife, saw her eyes were glistening now, and there was a smile on her lips.

"Darling," she whispered the words, "do you suppose— Couldn't we, I mean— Well, if you asked, couldn't we—"

Marnar shook his head. "No, they wouldn't let us go outside. Not a chance."

"But you could ask."

"It wouldn't do any good."

"Please... I remember how long it was before you asked me to marry you. You were afraid—"

"This is different." Marnar felt the hot blush on his cheeks.

"Please... And one of my girlfriends said—"

MARNER closed the door behind him. The voice that came at once from the speaker was cold, metallic, emotionless. "State your name and mission."

Marnar wondered why these machines couldn't be built so there would be some inflection to the voice, so that you could feel you were dealing with something more than "banks of electronic tubes activated by fire or no-fire commands.

"Colonist Marnar. Clearance is requested to permit my wife and I to visit outside the ship."

"Impossible. The lords have ruled investigation only from within the ship. There were no qualifications. No interpretation is authorized." There was a pause. Then: "Discipline Control Circuits ask that you state your reasons for seeking modification."

Marnar felt the sweat break out. He hadn't counted on this. Unless he could put up a good case he would automatically be subject to review as a colonist. If you were disqualified as a colonist—

Well, he had let a girl wheedle him, and tease him, and— He'd have to think fast now to make up for not taking a firmer stand with her.

He took a deep breath. "Close observation of possible organisms on this Planet Destination."

"Speculation invalid. The Trowers foresaw all possible life forms and their possible characteristics and their index of relationship. You may consult those findings in the psychaudio players."

Something else, then. Marnar hesitated, plunged: "Possibly there are materials or substances, unknown to us, which are to be found on this planet. They might be highly useful."

The metallic reply was prompt, overwhelming. "The Trowers have foreseen all conceivable needs. Supplies are maximum for each need."

"Other races, perhaps, have solved the problem of space travel. Perhaps they have been this way before. That is a factor which should receive our consideration."

"The index of probability of that event, as calculated by the Trowers, is of the order of point zero zero zero zero zero zero two seven four."

Marner had a vivid picture of himself entering the review chamber at the next sitting. There must be something—

"Trower logic," he said quickly, "excludes the possibility of zero to the *n*th power. I suggest that since the possibility of useful information to be gained from a closer inspection of the vicinity exists, it should be explored. If, of course, it can be done with minimum risk to expedition security."

There was a long silence. This time, Marner knew, he had scored. The statement was unanswerable by the machine. Transmission was being made to the lords.

The answer, when it came, was in the rich, resonant tones of the voice which had announced the landing on the planet.

"Colonist Marner," the voice said, "has clearance to emerge from the ship. He is to remain within radionic observation, audio contact is to be maintained, and he must return to the ship upon signal. All security regulations are to be observed, and all germ treatments are to be given upon return. Readmittance is to be allowed only after full clearance."

There was a slight pause, then the voice continued: "Colonist Marner may be accompanied by another colonist of his selection."

Marner hurried out. He knew the robospeaker was repeating the decision, transmitting it to all administration and control centers. He felt light with victory, shaken with the memory of the fear that had been in his mind.

It was not a light matter to come so close to being cited for review.

GROTESQUE in cocoon-snug space suits and dull bubble helmets, Colonist A. Marner and wife were allowed to step through the outer, now transparent, walls of the ship at ground level.

Marner heard the girl's voice in his helmet phones: "I didn't know that we could get through the walls like that."

Marner noticed how thin her voice sounded over the radio. Still, there was some of that warmth of tone that made men listen when she spoke. What was it she had said? He had been looking at their new surroundings.

She repeated the remark.

"Oh! Same as the wall-breakers inside the ship. Atomic alterations are made, phase shifts so the walls are out of phase with our bodies in the one spot. Then we walk through."

She wrinkled her nose, laughed at him. "You should have brought books ... Look!" She clapped her gloved hands. "Isn't it wonderful? It's like coming back to life!"

Marner held her arm. The joy of new experiences filled him with a new concept of life.

Then, realizing he was neglecting his tasks, he began making observational reports for the ship and for the radionic recorders. There was little he could tell of what the planet was like that was not known to the observers on the ship. He knew the essential difference was that he was out here, *among* things, and that the value of his report would be from its personal viewpoint.

They were well away from the ship and out of sight of it when he felt the grasp on his arm. He turned.

"Tell them about that." He saw the sparkle in her eyes as she pointed to

a wall of massive, darker green vegetation at the edge of the huge clearing they were entering.

He nodded. "No sign of animal life—yet. The vegetation under foot is springy and won't retain foot impressions for more than a moment. There is no trace of our own footfalls..."

They came to a small bush. "As we move toward the periphery of the clearing," reported Marner, "larger forms of vegetation are encountered." He knelt beside the bush, extended a gloved hand. "Some of the leaves on this appear to have been nibbled at. Apparently animal life in the vicinity was frightened away by the landing of the ship."

He felt the pressure of an elbow against his suit, looked up.

"Can I do some reporting, too?"

He nodded. He watched as she hurried over to a small tree. "May I tell them about this one? What do I do?"

"Just talk. Communications can hear you as well as they can hear me."

"Oh! I thought this lever—"

**H**E REACHED, stopped her hand before it could touch the lever on the front of the helmet collar.

"Easy. That one does the same thing to the front of the helmet that the walls of the ship did when we came out. Air can come in, germ-laden air, if you move it."

He only half listened as she described the tree. His eyes were exploring further into this world, wondering what was around the next group of bushes, and the next.

"...with bright red fruit that looks luscious enough to eat..."

His eyes caught a movement in the green wall of forest to the side of them. He interrupted her report, took over:

"I'm catching glimpses of animal life now. Tree dwellers. They seem to be somewhat humanoid... I can't

guess the similarity from this distance. They're shy, but seem to be curious about us. They're shaggy, unclothed. Any civilization would be, I think, of a very low order. They seem peaceable—Or frightened.

"We are about to return to the ship. There may be more dangerous life forms which we are not prepared to meet. Further exploration, if deemed advisable, should be undertaken by an equipped group."

They started back for the ship, glancing behind them occasionally to see if they were followed. Taking a somewhat different route from that which they had used before, he continued to report his observations.

Suddenly, aware that he was alone, he wheeled. His wife was following, some steps behind.

"You should smell it, darling."

"I've been smelling it," he replied. "I'm getting a little tired of smelling it. You know, it isn't the same mixture of gases you breathe on the ship— They put more oxygen in the tanks so that you can stay in the space suit longer."

Her silvery chuckle was gleeful through the phones. "I don't mean *that* air. I mean the air outside. It's just wonderful. Try it!"

He ran toward her. The transparency of her helmet, over the face, was unchanged— No, he could see that the lever had been pushed over. She was breathing in the air of the planet.

"No! You don't understand— The helmet lever— It's not like the walls of the ship. Air can come through too, where on the ship—" He stopped, stared at her. The smile was still on her face.

**S**HE SQUINTED at him, then raised the round red fruit she held in her hand. She put it through the front of the helmet and took— It was *another* bite, he saw.

"Delicious, ummm. Try?"

He said nothing, did nothing. He let her push the lever back on his own collar. He let her push the fruit through the helmet, against his lips.

There was a sweet, inviting odor. Hardly thinking, now, he bit down. She was right, it was delicious. But—

He jerked the fruit from her hand, threw it as far as he could. Then he pushed his lever, restoring the solidity of his helmet. He reached out, moved the lever on his wife's collar.

She pouted.

He took her by the shoulders, shook her.

"Do you realize what this means? Every word we say is heard by those in the ship as clearly as we hear it. The least we can expect is to be cited for review." He stopped, then, realizing that this was happening to them.

She patted his arm. "They can't do that. All we did was breathe a little of the air, take a tiny bite of the fruit."

"All we did— We've come in contact with unknown environment."

"Don't worry, darling. We'll—" She broke off with a gasp as they cleared a clump of bushes and the great bulk of the spaceship was before them. "How big it is! I never really knew how big—" Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

He shook his head, flashed her a glance which he hoped she would understand as meaning she should remain silent. He addressed his voice to the ship: "Colonist Marner and companion reporting in. Prepare to receive us."

They waited, expectantly. There was

no answer from the ship. "They didn't hear us." He didn't believe it, but he repeated his report.

Then, he felt the sharp dig of her fingers through the fabric that covered his arm. The ship was moving. Gently, feather-light, it floated up from the ground. He knew it was preparing to resume its former gravity match. Slowly, it was shrinking in size as it floated higher and higher.

The woman had crumpled to her knees. Her hands were flat on the ground, her shoulders twitching. The ship was a sliver high above them when the metallic voice sounded in their phones:

"Colonists A. Marner and Companion: Greetings and farewell. By exposing yourselves to untested environment, by becoming contaminated with unknown factors which must be regarded as inimical to life of other colonists, you have violated security.

"As Quarantine will not accept responsibility for your re-entering the ship, you are hereby marooned and stricken from the rolls of the colonists. We wish you good luck. By order of Supreme Commander, Spaceship Eden, Lord J'hova."

Marner's limp fingers parted, fell from the shoulders of his wife. She gave one frightened glance at the now empty sky, then threw herself into his arms, buried her helmet in his arms.

"Oh, Adhem!" she sobbed.

Holding her thus, Adhem Marner faced the green depths of the forest. Then, hand in hand, Adhem and Iv walked to meet it.

NEXT MONTH . . .

## "You Can't Escape From Mars!"

By E. K. JARVIS

THRILLS AND ROMANCE UNDER MARTIAN MOONS

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# THE WASHINGTON BRAIN



By WILLIAM KARNEY



**WATCH OUT!** The State of the centralized intelligence is coming! Well it's not quite as bad as that, but things are certainly humping in that direction.

The present census sets us thinking. The census takers now are coming around and laboriously recording the necessary information on cards in ink, a tedious process, which will mean that in Washington these records will have to be translated into card-code so that the sorting machines will be able to make sense from the huge mass of data that is being poured in.

But we recently saw an announcement to the effect that for the next census of nineteen-sixty, it is quite likely that the census taker will merely mark a line opposite a space on a card in taking your answer to his questions. For you he will make a whole series of marks. These marks are in *conductive ink!* Thus the cards need merely be sent to Washing-

ton and the electronic sorting machines will go through them like—well, like mad.

Each year the communication arts are speeded up until now we are no farther from anywhere than the length of our arm. Is this good or bad? According to the pessimists, it is the latter. But we don't think so. We have a sort of abiding faith in the ability of men to somehow stumble through the potential horrors of a possible police state into the civilized dignity of a genuine democracy.

There won't be a Washington Super Brain in spite of George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, or in spite of the impossibly amazing and efficient machines that seem to be putting less and less of a premium on what we once thought was a priceless commodity—brainpower!

At least we hope such a time won't come!

## MINIATURE UNIVERSE



By CAL WEBB



**SOME YEARS AGO**, during the war, there appeared an aircraft navigational instrument which seemed to hold great promise. Instead of using flat maps and charts as is ordinarily the case, it employed a hemisphere a foot and a half in diameter. Using very accurate measuring tools on it, an exact course could be plotted with hardly any labor at all and in addition, the navigator had a three-dimensional picture of his position at all times.

We haven't heard much about this invention since then, but we have reason to believe that it has been used successfully. However it suggests a potent thought for the future.

The time is far from remote when men are going to be taking the first feeble steps in the vacuousness of space. First the Moon, then, the inner planets. Mars and Venus are going to see the rocket trails of Tellurian ships. That is as certain as two and two are four.

The technical problems of interplanetary navigation—or astrogation, if you choose—have already been pretty well worked out. A number of astronomers with astrogation as a hobby have done a detailed analysis of astrogational problems. The usual techniques of sun-shots through optical instruments, Lunar shots of a similar kind, radio pulses and so on, plus calculations will serve to show the rocket pilot his position in space.

It seems to us however that a good bet is being neglected if some sort of a three-dimensional model is not prepared for the pilot. It could be done, not necessarily to scale, but at least with such an arrangement so that the pilot could get a direct physical picture of where he stood in relation to the sun and the Earth.

The instrument would be very similar to the scale models of the Solar System that one sees in various planetaria. It would not have to be elaborate or complex. It would merely serve as a sort of "orienter" to a pilot.

We think this is a good idea, for it must be remembered that space pilots will be as alone as anyone can get. It is one thing to be lost on the Pacific Ocean—a terrifying thing indeed—but it is far more shocking to consider a similar isolation in the midst of space.

Fortunately there are some advantages to being "lost" in space. Actually one couldn't be truly lost, because the "space-marks" are too familiar. The veriest tyro of a rocketeer could not fail to recognize the sun, or the major planets. But if astrogation should drive the pilot outside the inner orbits, it would be another matter. Even in empty space, Saturn's rings are not visible save through a 'scope. The three-dimensional locator is something to keep in mind. "Check us, Johnny—where are we?—is that Jupiter or..."

# TIME TOLLS



Fear and consternation swept through the room as they saw the effects of the strange beam.

# FOR TORO

*By Robert Moore Williams*

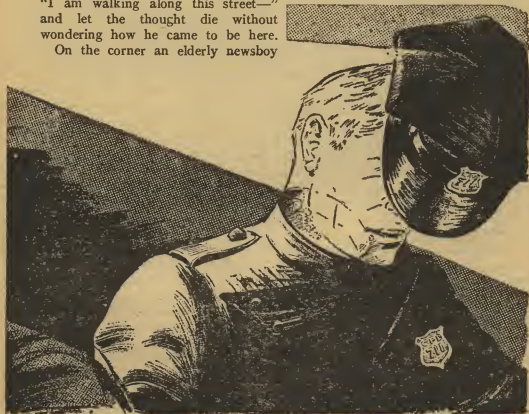
**He awoke as an amensia victim, beset by unknown enemies. Could his hurt mind recover soon enough to preserve his life?**

**H**IS MEMORY was bad but he didn't know it. He knew only that there was vague dissatisfaction in him and that he was hungry. The roar of homeward-bound evening rush-hour traffic pounded in his ears, rousing the vague wish to live in a land where they didn't have so much noise. He said to himself: "I am walking along this street—" and let the thought die without wondering how he came to be here.

On the corner an elderly newsboy

with a face like a sinful gnome yelled: "Killer Hunted." His ears heard the sounds but somehow they did not register on his mind. Nothing really registered. He was like a man walking in a dream without knowing he was dreaming.

There was a restaurant on the corner, reminding him again of the gnaw-



ing in his stomach. He went in. The place was familiar somehow. He knew he had been here before though not often enough to be remembered even by a waitress. Nobody ever remembered him, he thought wistfully...

"Blue plate special?" the waitress said without really looking at him or waiting for him to give his order. He nodded. Driven by hunger, he ate with relish. The cigarette afterward tasted good. He found the cigarette in a package in his pocket. He found the diamond-studded cigarette lighter there too, lit the cigarette with the lighter without ever really noticing what he was using. The waitress noticed. Her eyes widened. "Gosh!" she whispered. She looked with new respect at this man sitting at the counter. "Some more coffee, sir?" He didn't hear her. She filled his cup anyhow, hoping he would notice. He didn't.

There was a thought in the back of his mind. Like a fretful, restless ghost, it kept telling him that something was wrong—somewhere. He was watching the thought. It faded away, became formless and vague, leaving restless dissatisfaction behind it. Abruptly he rose to his feet. He managed to remember to pay the check and to leave a tip for the waitress before he left the restaurant.

"Killer Hunted!"

He gave the gnome with the sinful face a dime, took the paper thrust at him but forgot the nickel change, started down the street, stopped abruptly as the dateline caught his eye. *October 16, 1950.* The chilling wind moving from the northwest said it was October. The leaves in the gutter at the edge of the sidewalk said it was October. The newspaper said it. It ought to be right. Only the ghost lurking in the back of his mind whispered a protest. He turned back to the newsstand.

"I'm sorry but I believe you have given me the wrong paper." He was

polite about it. The newsboy had made a mistake, that was all.

"Huh? What mistake?" The sinful-faced gnome, thinking the customer had come back to demand the nickel, was indignant. "No mistakes corrected after you've left the stand."

"But this paper has the wrong date."

"Huh?" The gnome thrust his face near the paper, lifted indignant eyes. "October 16, it says."

"But—"

"But what, Mister?"

"WHAT DATE DID you think it was?" the girl said, gently. He turned quickly, startled and surprised. The girl had come up so quietly he had not heard her. She stood there now staring at him from compassionate, friendly, violet eyes. They were the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen. The color was blue shading indescribably into violet, the color of far-off skies. The girl herself was as beautiful as her eyes. Wearing a street dress and carrying a small purse, she looked as if she had just stepped out of the most modernistic bar, where she had sipped a cocktail, or out of the oldest museum on earth, where she had served as a model for the world's best painter.

"Eh?" He was startled. He had never met a girl like this, though he had always wanted to.

"What date did you think it was?" she asked again.

"Well—" The date had been in his mind, in the card index there, on one of the cards, all pulled out and ready to use. But when he tried to speak, the card slipped furtively back into the file, became one of millions of similar cards, lost and gone. Finding it again would be an incredibly difficult task. "Something is wrong with my card sorter," he thought. "It isn't working right. Time was when it found instantly the card I wanted." He

frowned. "Do I know you?"

"Of course you know me," the girl answered.

He smiled at her. "I would like to know you. But I don't. Goodbye now." Turning, he moved quickly down the street.

He did not want to go away like this but fear was rising in him. He did not know what he feared or why, only that the fear was there, a rising apprehension that something was wrong. In his mind, the card sorter was working frantically, searching for something that was missing. Meanwhile it was trying to conceal from him the fact that anything was missing.

A taxicab moved in a U turn to cross the street, pulled up at the curb beside him. The driver leaned out. "Taxi, mister?" The driver had the wizened, lined face of a dwarf and the alert eyes of a watchful bird.

"No, thanks."

The cab tooted along the curb beside him. "Drive you to the lab, mister," the driver said.

"What lab?"

The cabby shrugged. "Any lab?"

"What makes you think I might be going to a laboratory?"

"To your hotel, then."

"No thanks." He walked on. The cab remained at the curb, the driver sitting in it. Lighting a cigarette, he glanced back. The girl was coming along the sidewalk. Was she following him?

Why would she be following him? Why would anybody follow him? He wasn't important enough to follow. He wasn't—*Who was he?* The fingers lifting the cigarette began to shake. The card sorter, growing sullen, quit entirely. He did not know who he was. Or what he was.

Or how he had gotten here on this street.

Or what city this was.

Or his name.

Or his occupation.

In his brain, the sullen sorter refused to pull a single card out of his memory.

The mental shock was terrific, like running full speed into a stone wall. He realized that he had been operating automatically, like a robot or a well-oiled machine, responding to stimuli like hunger and curiosity. Because he had been hungry, he had gone into the restaurant. Because he had been curious, he had bought a newspaper. No doubt in this transaction his mind had followed a well-rutted reaction pattern—see paper, want paper, buy paper.

But the date on the newspaper was wrong. Did this mean something? If so—what? What did anything mean? What did he mean? Who was he? What was his name?

"WARREN!" The sound burst on his ears. Hand outstretched a man was coming out of a doorway toward him. It was this man who had called him Warren. Warren who? Warren what? Did he know this man? The name-caller was tall and skinny with something of the look of a hawk upon his narrow features. Beaming good-will and friendliness, he advanced. "Long time no see, Warren. Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"Oh, hello." At the word Warren, the card sorter stirred, once, as if it was about to begin selecting cards again, then, tired by the effort, relapsed again into indifference.

"This calls for a drink," Hawk-face said. "It really does. You old goat. You sure are the medicine for sore eyes. Only last night the missus was asking about you. She said, 'Have you seen Warren lately? Why don't you bring him home for supper some night?'" Hawk-face had his hand and was shaking it. Hawk-face hooked an arm through his arm. "Come on, let's get that drink."

"Thank you. Very generous of you, I'm sure. But—some other time."

"No time like the present."

Hawk-face applied pressure on the arm. "You old rascal, you." He beamed fondly.

"Look, I'm in a big hurry. I simply don't have time—"

"Take time," Hawk-face said.

Hawk-face had him and both knew it. Hawk-face urged him along the street, making a great show of friendliness, but never once relaxing the pressure on his arm.

"Just a minute," the girl said, behind them. Hawk-face jerked around. The girl with the violet eyes had caught up with them.

"What the hell do you want?" Hawk-face said.

Hawk-face made a noise like the growl of a trapped wildcat. "You'll play hell getting him."

"Will I?" she smiled, casually, as if this matter was of no great difficulty. "Either let him go or—"

"Or what?"

"Or I'm going to start screaming," the girl said. "You've never really heard a girl scream until you have heard me."

Hawk-face looked like a trapped animal. "Damned witch. Who the hell are you? Where do you figure in this?"

"I'm going to count to five. Either you let him go or listen to me scream. One."

"But—"

"Two."

Sweat was on Hawk-face's features. "Look, we'll cut you in."

"Three."

"Woman, you don't know who the hell you're monkeying with!

"Four."

Hawk-face looked as if he was about to choke.

"Five," the girl said. A look of determination appeared on her face. Her breast swelled as she took a deep

breath preparatory to screaming. She opened her mouth.

Snarling, Hawk-face let go of the arm of the man he had called Warren.

"Thank you," the girl said. Smiling, she took hold of the arm Hawk-face had released. "Come, dear," she said. "Come, Warren."

He didn't resist. He trusted this girl somehow, without knowing why or how. Hawk-face walked rapidly away. The girl saw the taxi, still at the curb. She waved toward it. The driver got it into gear, opened the door for them.

**H**E ENTERED the cab first. Perhaps it wasn't the gentlemanly thing to do but he had the impression that it was definitely expected of him. The girl stepped in behind him. She crossed her legs, opened her purse, took out a package of cigarettes, offered him one. He took it, found the lighter in his pocket, lit both cigarettes. Then he settled back on the cushions. If there was calmness in him, it was all on the surface. He thought: "Something is going to happen. Well, let it."

The girl watched him. She seemed awed. "You are really rather remarkable," she said.

"Am I? Why?"

"You don't know who you are or what you are and yet you sit there as if the only thing on your mind is what a nice day it is. There must be a maelstrom going full blast inside your mind but the only sign of it is just a trace of moisture on your upper lip."

"My card sorter is out of order," he said. His hand went up to the trace of tell-tale sweat; he wiped it away. "Maelstrom is a weak word for what is happening inside my mind."

"You will get over it," the girl said. "The worst will pass in a few days. Of course there will always remain startling moments when you think you



are remembering events that haven't happened yet. But you will learn how to control these moments."

He nodded as if what she said made sense. In fact, it didn't. He fingered the cigarette lighter. It was a beautifully made little instrument, apparently of solid gold set with diamonds. It must have cost a fortune. Could he afford to own such cigarette lighters? It was another question he could not answer. There were so many! One of the diamonds caught his eye. Something was wrong there, some slight imperfection. What was wrong? The top surface was a little too curved, for one thing, for another, a tiny hole was visible in the back of the jewel.

At the sight of the hole in the back of the jewel, cold water splashed on his spine, a dripping spongy of it. This was not an ordinary cigarette lighter, it was something else. But what? Reluctantly the card sorter stirred, went furiously into action, brought a dozen cards up before his mind for inspection at the same time. His mouth fell open. He remembered, now, what this lighter was and how it could be used. A gaping chasm opened into his mind and he remembered. Also he remembered where he had gotten it.

Sweat appeared again on his upper lip. He could feel it there but he made no attempt to remove it. His mind was completely engrossed in the information the card sorter was bringing him. Stunning, bewildering, blinding information. He could hardly believe that what he was remembering was true.

But it had to be true. The lighter proved it was true.

Then the card sorter, like a defective relay functioning for a moment and then erratically refusing to function, went off the job again. It left one card plainly visible before the eye of his mind.

The card that told him what the lighter was and how it could be used!

## CHAPTER II

THE GIRL had not told the cab driver where to go but he slipped the cab into gear and swung expertly into the traffic as if he knew exactly where he was going.

"Who was that man who had you by the arm?" the girl said.

"I don't know." He knew only one thing—what the lighter was and how to use it. He kept it out of sight in his sweaty hand.

"But what was he trying to do to you?"

He shook his head. Hawk-face was as much of an enigma as he was himself. Hawk-face had seemed to know him but he did not know the man, had never seen him before in his life. What had Hawk-face wanted? To buy him a drink? It didn't seem likely. Hawk-face had been after something. But what?

The driver was watching them in the rear-vision mirror, he was leaning back in the seat and trying to listen to what they said. Was this fact important?

The girl was frowning. She seemed to be concentrating, trying hard to remember something. "This must be the beginning of the pattern that takes you out of history," she said. "It can't be anything else."

"W-what?" he said.

"I can't explain it because I don't know what is to happen," she said, frowning. "Nobody really knows. It's one of the great mysteries of all time."

"What are you talking about?" He heard bewilderment in his voice, knew that the bewilderment was an accurate echo of the feelings in him.

"I'm talking about you," she answered. "You are one of the big men of history, as big as Einstein and Newton."

He stared at her. "Are you out of your mind?"



"No." The answer was simple, short, and direct. "I came before you and I have finished the transition process. My mind is working again. No, I know what I am talking about when I say you are one of the great men of all time. I also know what I am talking about when I say that you are one of the great mysteries, one of the great enigmas of the ages. But I don't know the part that Hawk-face plays in what is to happen. However, I strongly suspect that you had better be very wary of that man—Eek!" She gave a sound like a frightened mouse as the cab slewed on two wheels into a side street. Tires screamed on asphalt as the cab was jerked to a halt. The driver spun and started over the back seat toward them. He had a gun in his hand.

Warren remembered that this cab driver had tried to pick him up. He suspected instantly that the cab driver and Hawk-face had been working together. Certainly the intention of the cab driver was similar to the intention of Hawk-face.

"Get your hands up!" the driver ordered.

The girl said, "Eek!" again and died at the driver.

Warren, lifting his hands, brought the lighter into focus and pressed the right spot. From the jewel with the tiny hole in it sprang a cone of radiation that looked a little like light. It struck the driver in the face. How the light produced its result was not obvious but the result itself was very plain.

The driver said, "Uck!" His face froze in the grimace that had been contorting it at that moment. He dropped the gun which he had been swinging around to point at the girl. It went out of sight in the front seat. The driver went out of sight behind it, sliding down like a gargoyle coming loose from the base that supports it. Lunging at him, the girl fell forward

over the seat.

Before Warren could turn it off, she fell into the spray of light.

She collapsed over the top of the seat.

**H**ORRIFIED, Warren stared at her. He had not intended to harm her. Without knowing quite how he knew it, he knew the results of the light were not permanent. Used at this intensity, the light stunned but did not kill. Used at a higher intensity, it produced much more devastating results, but at this low power, the driver and the girl would both recover in the matter of half an hour, the exact length of time needed for recovery depending both on how the beam had struck them and their physical and mental condition at the moment of impact.

She would be all right. All he had to do was to get her to a place where she could lie down for half an hour. He could keep her in the cab, dump the driver, and drive the cab around until she recovered. He started to get out of the cab, intending to go around and slip under the wheel.

Tires screeched again as another vehicle made a quick turn into this side street. In the dusk the features of the man crouched over the wheel were dimly visible.

Hawk-face.

The man had followed the cab. There was a second man with him. The car was driving straight toward him. Warren knew that he had no time to get the cab started, no time for anything except one thing. Ducking around the cab, he jumped a fence into the back yard of a small private residence. Rubber yelled on the asphalt as the car was jerked to a halt beside the cab. Warren ran to the alley, slid into it, ran along it.

Behind him voices shouted, feet pounded.

"Where in the hell did he go?" he heard Hawk-face yell.

"I saw him jump that fence," a second voice answered.

"Find him. The boss wants him bad!"

Warren ran like a rabbit from hounds. He hated to leave the girl behind him, but if he stayed to try to help her, both might be captured. If he could get away, he could help her later. Helping her was important to him somehow, but at the moment other things were more important. The first was escape. The second was finding out who he was.

Bigger than Einstein and Newton, the girl had said. He could not believe she knew what she was talking about. Nobody was bigger than these two men. Behind him the shouts and the pounding footsteps died down. He crossed to the next street. A green bus was pulling in to a stop. He climbed in it. Five minutes later, he got out and changed to a taxi. He breathed a little easier now. Hawk-face had been left behind.

Changing to a second taxi, he asked the driver a question. "Do you know a good cheap hotel where they will put me up without baggage?"

"I know a dozen."

"Take me to the nearest one."

Reaching the hotel, he paid for his room in advance. The desk clerk paid him no attention, evidently check-ins without baggage were no novelty in his life. The room to which he was taken was small and uncomfortable but it was a room. It was also protection, of a sort, against the menace outside in the growing night.

"Who am I?"

He began an examination of his clothes. In the right pocket was some loose change and eight dollars in bills, held in a large paper clip. There was no bill fold with its identifying data. His coat pockets yielded what

was left of the package of cigarettes and the lighter. And nothing else. No scraps of paper, no keys. He picked up the lighter.

THE CASE was gold plated but a scratch revealed the existence of some other metal under the gold, duro-steel he suspected. With the exception of the one that served as a lens for the devastating beam, the diamonds looked to be real. He judged each to be about half a carat in size. There was no maker's name on the lighter, somehow or other he had not expected to find one. People who made lighters like this one did not advertise them with their names.

He did not like this lighter. Through it, he could glimpse dimly and vaguely the civilization around it. Life in a land where people carried deadly weapons disguised as cigarette lighters was a tricky, unfair business.

Because he had grim suspicions as to what would happen, he did not try to pry into the operating parts of the lighter. A ray weapon that could be held in the hand! Genius had made this lighter, but it was a sick genius, turning its high art to weapons of destruction, tearing down rather than building up.

The lighter told him nothing about himself. He began to examine his clothes. There was a maker's name in the suit but the garment had been factory made. Cleaner's marks were visible on the pockets. If he had time, they would tell him who he was, if he could locate the cleaner. He stripped down to his skin.

The skin was smooth and light brown in color, muscle tone seemed to be excellent and the muscles seemed to be well developed. He guessed off-hand that he was about thirty years old. He seemed to be in good health, his hair was black, the mirror in the

room told him that his face was well-formed and pleasant. There were no tattoo marks, he had known there wouldn't be any.

He still didn't know who he was, what he was, where he lived or where he worked. He did not know his occupation or profession. He lit a cigarette, cautiously using the lighter for this purpose. When used to light cigarettes it worked just like any other lighter.

There was a radio in the room, a quarter in the slot type. He found a quarter in the change he had taken from his pocket, slipped the coin into the slot, began to dress.

"Police report a new development in the case of Mike Toro, notorious killer who escaped two days ago from death row at the state penitentiary. While they are unwilling to state the exact nature of the new development, recapture of the killer is expected soon."

Listening, in the back of his mind fear opened a fanged mouth, and grinned at him. Was he Mike Toro? He pushed the thought resolutely out of his mind. The card sorter in his mind was still sulking in the corner, refusing to work. Was he Toro? The card sorter refused to answer the question for him, or any other question. "Give me the pass-word," the sorter complained. "Give it to me before I work."

Pass-word? Was there such a thing? If there was, he didn't know the answer. The girl had said there must be a maelstrom raging in his mind. The maelstrom was there all right. It consisted of questions, pounding ceaselessly. Are you Toro? If you are not Toro, who are you? What happened to you? What are you doing here? How did you lose your memory?

A sound caught his ear. He turned quickly. The door was opening. Hawk-

face was coming in. He had a gun in his hand. There was another man with him.

"Take it easy, Sumner," Hawk-face said. "We're not going to hurt you. It's just that the boss says we are to get you."

HE HEARD the word Sumner. In his mind, the card sorter yelled: "That's it, that's the pass word. That's your name. Warren Sumner." Like a well-oiled machine beginning to function, the card sorter swung into high speed action, bringing in regular order the cards of his life for his inspection.

*Warren Sumner, age 31, a mathematician. In graduate school the professors had called him potentially the greatest mathematician alive.* He had never attended college. A sweeping entrance examination had revealed that he had the mental capacity to skip the four year college course and jump straight into the graduate school. Everything that had ever happened in his life came back to him, his childhood and his youth, the games he had played, the girls he had kissed. Memories of his work came back, the long patient mathematical exploration of the universe that he had attempted. Back early in the Twentieth Century the scientists had begun to suspect that if the enigmas of the universe were ever unlocked, they would yield themselves to a mathematical key. He remembered some of the articles he had published in scientific journals, mostly math, they had been. He remembered his search for the mathematical key that would unlock the complex inter-relationship between mind and matter, that would include in its analysis the way the mind formed concepts, the way the mind abstracted essential qualities from the world outside of it, the way the mind formed symbols. The mind was a part of the

universe, it had to understand itself before it could understand the whole. He had gone through the work of the mathematicians and philosophers of past centuries, seeking understanding. He had found something. What?

The card sorter told him what he had found. Just a hint it had been, a clue. He had developed the equations and they had been published, attracting only jeering comment. Then he had begun to develop the equipment the equations described. He had rented space over a garage as a laboratory, had worked for years. Even the tools he had needed had not existed, he had had to invent them, then fabricate them before he could build the machine.

What was the machine?

"Are you sure you want to know?" the card sorter questioned.

He was sure. The sorter brought out the card. He looked at it, in his mind's eye. The sorter hastily put it back into file. He had built the machine. Two months past he had finished it. What had happened after that?

"Those cards are all locked up," the sorter explained. "I can't get to them, can't tell you what happened."

"Try and get to them."

"No use trying. They're locked. The lighter was all I could tell you about."

Two months were missing from his life. He had no memory whatsoever of the previous two months. It was this missing memory that had made him think the date on the newspaper had been wrong. Instead of the date being October 16, he had thought it should have been August 16.

His memory was sound again, except for this period. He looked at Hawk-face there in the room, the gun covering him. In his whole life as he recalled it was no memory of Hawk-face. "Take it easy, Sumner," Hawk-

face repeated. "Just get your clothes on and come along with us. And no tricks, nothing like that trick you used to knock out the cabbie. This gun's got a mighty soft touch on the trigger."

"Did I ever see you before tonight?" Sumner questioned.

"Nope."

"What do you want with me? I don't know you."

"The boss wants to talk to you."

"Who is the boss?"

Hawk-face shook his head. This was a question he did not choose to answer.

"What does this boss want with me?"

"He'll tell you that."

"How did you find me?"

This was a question Hawk-face could answer. "We figured you'd try to hide out in a cheap dump somewhere. So we called on the hotels asking about people who had checked in without baggage during the last half-hour. We got you first crack out of the box."

"I see," Sumner said. He had had no experience in hiding and he had chosen a poor hiding place. He pulled on his clothes, pulled a cigarette out of the package, reached over to the dresser and picked up the lighter.

"Are you going under your own power or are you going to try to kick up a fuss?" Hawk-face said.

"How would you like to be dead?" Sumner said.

"Huh?" Hawk-face's eyes narrowed. As if his collar had suddenly become too tight, he reached up and thrust a finger between the cloth and the skin. "I don't get it."

"What did you do with the girl?"

"Huh? Oh. She came to and took air. We didn't do anything with her. Look, Sumner, the boss is waiting."

These men were tools, intermediaries. If he blasted them, others would

take their place. He made up his mind. "Okay, I'll go," he said. He used the lighter to light the cigarette, then dropped it into his pocket.

He went out of the dingy hotel room between them. Probably there were not two more badly deceived men in the whole continent of North America than Hawk-face and his partner. They thought they had him trapped. In point of fact, he could have destroyed both of them, and walked free.

But if he did this, he might never discover the identity of this mysterious boss behind them. Nor what the girl had meant when she had said that this must be the beginning of the pattern that was to take him out of history.

Out of history? What had she meant by that?

### CHAPTER III

**D**OWN ON the street, they put him in the back seat of a Chevrolet sedan. He got the impression that this car had been chosen because there were literally millions of other cars like it on the street. Hawk-face sat beside him on the back seat. Under the street lights, the gun Hawk-face was holding was evident. Sumner lit another cigarette and grinned at the gun.

"Pretty soon you're going to have to get down on the floorboards," Hawk-face said.

"Sure," Sumner answered. "You don't want me to see where I'm going, eh?"

"It safest that way. What you don't know you can't tell." A little later, he said, "Time to lay down now. And don't try to raise up a stink."

"No stink," Sumner said. Doors opened somewhere, the car slowed, stopped. Doors closed. "Here's where we get out," Hawk-face said. Sumner found himself in a basement garage,

empty now, except for the car that had brought him here. They went up a flight of stairs.

"Watch him, Steve, while I go see if the boss is ready to talk to him," Hawk-face said. He disappeared up a flight of stairs, then returned, opened a door and motioned for Sumner to pass through it.

Sumner found himself in a room that might have been located anywhere. There was a green studio couch, a couple of chairs and a desk, all used, all worn. Two windows were closed off by lightproof cloth. The ceiling light shed a dull glow that was more concealing than revealing.

Behind the desk sat a man. Thick black unruly hair rose from a forehead and face that were too white. A trace of a scar showed along one cheek. Sumner noted these things as being unimportant. It was the man's eyes that held his attention. They were shiny black with a hot glint in them that told all the world to go to hell.

A man with eyes like these was automatically a big shot. The eyes were a plain warning to everybody to get out of this man's path and the devil take anybody who ignored the warning.

"This is him," Hawk-face spoke.

Almost imperceptibly, the man at the desk nodded. Hawk-face moved soundlessly away. The door closed softly.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Sumner?"

The tone was courteous, almost pleasant. It would have been pleasant except for the note of compulsion in it. Because of this tone, this man would naturally lead other men. Others would follow him, because of the eyes and the tone. But they would not love him, for the same reasons.

Sumner sat down.

"Cigar, cigarette?" The scientist took the cigarette that was offered, took the lighter from his pocket. Keep-

ing it cupped in his hands, he lit the cigarette. When he had finished using the lighter, it was still in his hand but below the level of the desk. The black eyes searched Sumner's face. "You are Warren Sumner?" Privately he seemed to feel reason to doubt the identity of the scientist.

"Yes."

"I-ah-well I was sort of expecting—"

"A bigger man?"

"Sort of." He stared curiously at Sumner as if he found in the scientist an object of intense interest. "Well. You're Sumner." He shook his head. "I guess you are, all right. I saw a statue of you once—"

"I beg your pardon," Sumner gasped. The remark had been made so casually and carelessly that he thought he had misunderstood. "A statue of me?"

"Yeah. There's a statue of you. Several of them, I expect. Didn't you know?"

**S**UMNER felt his mouth sag open. He snapped it shut. This man was insane. There was no other conclusion. A statue of him! Not a hundred people even knew that he existed.

"To hell with that." The man behind the desk shrugged away a dozen statues with one twist of his shoulders. "Do you know who I am?"

"No."

"Do you want to know?"

"I—I guess so." Confusion was putting his self-control under vigorous attack.

"I'm Mike Toro."

"Huh? I mean—" At the moment his mind was simply too busy with other tasks to recall this name.

"You mean you've never heard of me, never heard of Mike Toro?" The man behind the desk seemed to find this hard indeed to believe.

"Oh," Sumner said. His memory gave him back the name that he had heard on the radio broadcast. Again confusion assaulted his mind. He pushed it away, forced himself to think of Mike Toro and what Mike Toro could possibly mean to him. He had never seen the man until this moment, had not known that he existed until he heard the radio broadcast. But Toro seemed to know about him. Toro had certainly sent men seeking him.

"They—they're looking for you." Sumner couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I know. They've got a special cell wired for gas all ready for me." Toro's laugh was brittle and without point.

"What did you do?"

"To earn a trip to the death cell? Nothing, really. I killed a fool. The trouble was, several people saw me do it." He shook his head, dismissing from consideration the unnamed fool who had died by his hand. "Do you know why I sent for you?"

"I do not."

"I want you to hide me."

"Hide you!" Of all the answers Sumner had been anticipating, this was the one he had least expected. "I should think you would have connections adequate for that purpose."

"I got connections all right but they won't hold up long. I killed another fool on the getaway and this one was a cop. Sooner or later another cop will get me under the sights of his gun. No, I got to get away."

"I should think you would have planned a hiding place when you planned an escape."

"I did."

"Well—"

"You were it."

"I?"

"You still are."

"Eh?" Was this man mad? "I don't understand you."

"Sure, sure," Toro answered impatiently. "I'd put on that act too, in your shoes."

"What act? What are you talking about?"

"Quit kidding." Toro was becoming more and more impatient. "I know about you and you won't do yourself a nickel's worth of good by trying to act innocent. I want you to hide me—in time."

"What?" Sumner gasped the single word.

"I said to quit kidding. Didn't you develop the time equations?"

SUMNER was more surprised than ever, mostly at the fact that this man knew about the equations. They had been a mathematical development of the concept of time as the fourth dimension of space inadequately perceived and distorted in the human eyes and the human mind. In effect, they said that time was a fourth dimension of space, but that the human perceptive mechanism perceived this fourth dimension inadequately as time. The theory was not new, the equations were. "What has this got to do with hiding you?"

"Didn't you say that the equations meant that a time machine could be built?"

"I said no such thing. True, there was a story in the newspaper about me, but the writer misquoted me."

Toro seemed not to hear. "Didn't you build a time machine?"

"I?" Sumner gasped.

"Please!" Toro said. "Where have you been the last two months?"

Sumner was silent.

"You've been in time," Toro said. "When the boys said they couldn't find you, I knew where you were. I had them on the watch for you all around your lab. We were waiting for you to come back—*out of time!*"

Sumner was still silent. Up to two

months ago his memory was clear and complete. He had been constructing a time machine, he had been working on it for years, working secretly. Although Sumner had not been willing to admit it, Toro had been telling the exact truth—up to a point. That point was two months in the past. It covered the period of which Sumner had no memory.

Had he actually used the time machine, had he actually been in time during these two months? He had no memory of using the machine, merely of getting it ready for use. He had no memory of being in time. So far as he was concerned, the two months were formless, foggy, without definition and without clearness, a period from which the card sorter could produce no memory cards. Had he actually been in time? He started to laugh, then stopped abruptly as his eyes caught a flicker from one of the diamonds on the lighter in his hand.

In the year 1950 this lighter could not exist. Science could not construct such a device.

Yet he had it.

Where had he gotten it?

Where, if not in time?

Sweat appeared on Sumner's face. Fear turned a double somersault in his mind, laughing like an idiot. His frozen gaze came up to Toro's face.

The killer was watching him and was nodding. Eager lights were burning in the black eyes. "It's like this, Sumner. A man in my shoes doesn't have much choice. If I as much as show my nose outside this room, the chances are I'll be picked up. I'll be lucky if they even take me in, if the first cop who sees me doesn't put a bullet in me first, before he bothers to take me in. Even if I get taken in alive, all I'll get will be a fast trip to the death chamber. . . . If I stay here, sooner or later one of my own boys will turn me in, for a shot at the re-



ward money. I can't get out of the country. The airports are watched, the ships are watched, the border is watched. Every cop in the country has a picture of me pasted right up behind his eyes. Every bulletin board in every police station and in every post office and in every sheriff's office has a poster of me. I'm just about as hot as any human being can get and stay alive. I kinda like living. Which is where you come in."

"But—"

"There are no 'buts'. I don't have any place to hide. Try and understand that. Try to understand also that if you don't help me, I'm a dead man. So far as money is concerned, I've got some of it stashed away. Anything you say will be all right. A hundred grand—" The voice became persuasive but the eyes did not leave Sumner's face. The scientist sweated. He was glad he had the lighter, glad because it was his only way out, or the only one that he could see.

Aiding a fugitive from justice was a serious criminal offense.

"Suppose I refuse to help you?" Sumner said.

"Huh?" For a moment Toro was startled, then he laughed, a sound without mirth in it. "You don't have much control over the situation."

"Don't I?"

"No." The black eyes were hot. "Sumner, get it straight—I'll kill you if you don't help me."

Toro meant every word he said. His meaning was clear in the tone of his voice and in the glitter of his black eyes. There were many questions about this man which Sumner would like to have answered—how he had gotten his knowledge of the time equations was one of them—but there was no chance of asking them now. Toro would kill him if he did not obey. Probably if he did obey, if he sent Toro into time—presuming he

was able to do that—Toro would kill him anyway, to protect himself.

Either way the answer was the same. Sumner shrugged. "I guess you've got me." The lighter in his hand, he rose to his feet. As he moved, his finger sought the tiny firing stud. He brought up the lighter.

Toro saw it. His eyes glittered with hot flame. He could not have recoiled faster if he had seen a rattlesnake. He came to his feet in a single lunging motion, his left fist driving straight at Sumner's chin.

Smack! The fist connected.

Sumner saw the fist coming, tried to dodge. Too late and too slow. He knew when the fist landed on the point of his jaw, knew he was going over backward. Falling, his head rammed hard against the door facing. Lights flashed in front of his eyes like exploding fireworks on the night of the Fourth of July. Then the lights were engulfed by darkness.

Sumner felt himself fall, crashing, into that darkness.

#### CHAPTER IV

AMMONIA stung his nostrils, biting, eating its way into the lining of his nose. He sneezed violently and tried to shove the ammonia away. "He's coming to," a voice said.

"Get that damned stuff away from me," Sumner muttered. The ammonia was irritating, there was also nausea in his stomach. What had happened to him? His card sorter was out of order again, his memory flickering like a badly-run movie.

The ammonia was taken away. "I'll handle it from now on," Toro's voice came. "You go outside and watch in the car. If anything suspicious shows, honk twice." Footsteps faded away. Sumner sat up. Agony clamped a hard vise around his stomach. He held his head in his hands

and waited while the agony settled itself a little. His head felt like it was going to split wide open.

"Feel kinda bad?" Toro said.

Sumner nodded.

"Sorry I had to hit you but you shouldn't have tried to use Kovenair beam on me," the killer said placatingly.

"Kovenair beam?" Sumner muttered.

"A fellow by the name of Kovenair invented it," Toro explained. "It got its name from him."

"You mean the lighter?"

"Yeah."

Sumner thought of that. He had never heard of anybody by the name of Kovenair but his ignorance proved nothing. He twisted his head, was somewhat relieved to find that it did not fall off and that his neck was not broken, as he had half-way expected. Little by little the shooting pains inside his skull began to subside. He lifted his head, looked around. He was in his own laboratory.

"You move fast," he said.

Yeah. I thought we might as well bring you over here before you woke up."

It wasn't an elaborate place. The lab occupied the second floor over a run-down garage, a spot he had chosen because the rent was low and because the people living in the neighborhood were elaborately unconcerned with the activities of a scientist. They had regarded him as just another queer duck in a world that already had too large a supply of that commodity. Yes, this was his lab. There was the three-wire input lines bringing 220 volt current into the room from the big transformer outside the window, there were the workbenches with the equipment piled in disarray, just as he had left them, there was—

He looked once, blinked, then looked again. In one corner was an

array of equipment grouped together into a machine of some kind. Heavy power leads ran from a motor generator to a series of radio tubes that had been designed to produce vhf (very high frequency) oscillations. He stared at the array. In his mind, the card sorter reluctantly brought him information about this machine, its purpose, its function.

Toro was watching him. "There it is," the killer said.

"I see," Sumner said. "If you knew it was here, why didn't you just go ahead and use it, why did you have to kidnap me?"

"If they had pushed me hard enough I would have done just that," Toro answered. "But I would rather have you around working it for me. I'm a little bit scared of the thing."

"How did you know it was here, how did you know about me?" Sumner questioned. This question had been rising in his mind all the time, demanding an answer, but he had been pushing it aside in favor of other questions.

"I had the boys start looking for you and when they couldn't find you, I had them start looking for it," Toro said.

"But how did you even know I existed?"

"How?" Toro seemed astonished. "I finally remembered about you."

"But how could you remember about me when we had never met, when, so far as I know, you had never heard of me?"

"I remembered reading about you. I told you I had seen a statue of you."

"Where am I famous?"

"Why, in the future," Toro answered, surprised. "Don't you yet know about yourself. You're one of the most famous men who ever lived—you're the man who invented time travel!"

"I—WHAT?" Sumner choked. His gaze lifted, went back to the machine. Astonishment reeling through his mind. He knew he had been working on the problem of time travel, he knew he had been trying to design a time machine, but he did not know that he had succeeded. There the machine stood. Like the lighter, it was evidence that could not be brushed away.

He had built it. But the functioning of the machine, if he had used it, belonged to that blank period in his life. He had no memory of using it. When he tried to remember if he had used it and what had happened to him, the card sorter in his mind patiently told him that those cards were in the forbidden section.

"How do you know I invented time travel? How do you know I am famous because of that?"

"Because I came from the future," Toro explained. "Hell, man, they used your invention to shoot me back here into time. I had enemies in my own world. They got rid of me by kicking me back into time." Hot anger directed at those enemies showed on the swarthy face and in the dark eyes. "After I landed here, I kept quiet until I had learned the language and the customs. Both change, you know. Then I began to branch out. I was doing fine until I got into trouble. Only when they had me on the way to the gas chamber did I remember that I had come back to the exact time when the inventor of time travel was alive. That was when I had the boys start looking for you. If I could find you, I could not only save my neck here but I could get you to send me back to my own time where I can get even with the dirty double-crossing rats who trapped me and sent me here."

Bang! went Toro's fist on the table. "I'm killing two birds with one

rock, Sumner. I'm escaping to a place where the cops here will never find me—and I'm returning to get even with the rats who sent me here. They've forgotten all about me by now. Won't they be surprised when I give 'em a dose of the Kovenair beam!" He gloated at the thought. "I've got it all planned out already, just exactly what I'll do and how I'll do it. They'll get the Kovenair beam all right—at full power."

Listening, Warren Sumner felt sickness rise again in his stomach. He had developed the time equations and had designed and built the first practical time machine. His purpose, aside from the actual pure thrill of discovery, had been manifold. First, he had thought of using time travel for exploration, and he had actually collected gear, rifles, axes, knives, all the tools an explorer might need, for trips into the remote past, into those periods of earth about which history tells little or nothing. They were all here in the lab now, in the big wooden box in the far end of the room.

The idea of using time travel to explore the past had tremendous appeal to him. Historians had wrangled for generations about the real cause of the fall of Rome. If time travel was possible, trained historians could be sent back to the time of Rome to make an on-the-spot investigation of the cause of the fall of that mighty civilization. Cro-Magnon man had vanished, leaving behind him a mystery that puzzled anthropologists. With time travel, scientists could go back to the days of the Cro-Magnons, follow this ancient race to its final resting place. There was, for instance, the mystery of the great Pyramid. Who had built this great stone monument, and why. What methods had been employed? How had the gigantic blocks of stone been transported from the quarries to the building site? Science had no real

explanation. There were other mysteries hidden in the depths of time, challenging the mind. There was the puzzle of the Sumerians, the inhabitants of the ancient land of Sumer. Where had they come from? There was the puzzling question of the origin of the planet Venus? Had Venus actually been a comet that had wandered into the solar system. Or had it been torn from the planet Jupiter? Time travel would solve the problem. Time travel would solve a thousand problems. Or so he had thought. So he had planned, so he had dreamed.

**HIS SICKNESS** came from the fact, clear now before his eyes, that his invention had been perverted to other uses. Somebody had used it as a weapon, a way to get rid of an enemy. Toro was planning to use it as a way to escape from the law. Thus men had made a mockery of his dream, had trampled it in the dust, had spat upon it, had used it for selfish purposes. He wondered about the unknown Kovenair who had devised the beam that now was used as a weapon hidden in a cigarette lighter. What had been Kovenair's dream when he had discovered the beam? It hadn't been destruction, Sumner thought. No real scientist ever willingly built a weapon, except for his own defense. But vicious men perverted the discoveries of science to selfish purposes.

"But why did you come to me?" Sumner protested. "Why didn't you just build your own time machine?"

"Because I don't know how," Toro answered.

"But you came from the future, you've been in a time machine."

"Sure, but they aren't exactly common things even in the future. You've seen a jet plane fly, haven't you?"

"Sure."

"Could you build one?"

"No."

"Well, I've seen a time machine work, but I couldn't begin to build one."

"How far into the future do you want to go?"

"To 2930," Toro answered promptly.

Sumner was silent, thinking. There was a way-out of this situation, but it was a way he did not want to take if he could avoid it. "What do you know about the laws of time travel?" he asked.

"Nothing. I didn't even know there were any laws."

"What if there is a law which says you can't go back to your own time?"

The black eyes fixed themselves on Sumner. "I wouldn't do any kidding, if I were in your shoes." He reached into his pocket, brought out the lighter. "There's a lot of ways to use this thing. Do you know all of them?"

"I guess not."

"Well, here's one you may have missed." He focused the lighter on the scientist's hand. At low power, the beam shot out. Sumner choked back the scream that leaped to his lips. The sensation in his hand was one of unbearable agony. He jerked away. Laughing, Toro turned off the beam. "That's just a sample." He slid the lighter back into his pocket. "Get busy, Sumner."

Sumner slid from the table, moved unsteadily toward the equipment in the back end of the room, Toro following like a watchful shadow. The equipment was exceedingly complex but the main function was clear. There was a seat, a place for an operator to sit. Directly in front of the seat was a control panel, containing among other things a two-way switch and a finely graduated dial. The two-way switch was marked F and B, F for Forward, B for Back. The radiation from the machine was focused on

the operator in the control seat. The dial registered the number of years for which the machine was set. There was a final switch which set the whole machine in operation.

The operator made the setting in advance, then shoved home the final switch. The setting of the instruments determined where he went in time. When he reached the designated year, the machine turned off automatically. After that, the operator was strictly on his own. The machine did not go with him. It remained here, in this time.

The effect of the operation of the machine was simply the drawing of a quick veil between the operator and reality. When the machine turned itself off, the veil disappeared. And the operator found himself in a new time.

Outside, in the night, a horn honked—twice.

**T**ORO SPUN, ran toward the light switch. "I got to see what that is. Don't try anything funny in the dark." He reached the switch, snapped it off. From his pocket, he jerked a flashlight. The beam caught Sumner. "Be still, you." Sumner was still.

The horn did not honk again.

*Crash!*

A window in the back end of the lab exploded in a shower of breaking glass. Something thudded against the ceiling, fell to the floor. Simultaneously a window on the other side of the lab burst in a shower of glass. Again something struck the ceiling, fell to the floor.

Two soft phuts sounded. They weren't loud noises, they didn't sound dangerous. Sumner wondered what they were. Apparently Toro knew.

"Gas grenades," the killer shouted.

An instant later, Sumner caught the first whiff of the raw gas and began to choke. He heard Toro curse again, heard other gas grenades land in the

room and explode softly. He dropped on the floor, rolled himself into a ball, covered his nose and his eyes and tried not to breathe.

This was tear gas, he vaguely recognized. From outside came a babble of voices, growing in intensity.

"Surrender in there or we'll blast you out."

The police, Sumner thought, with vast thanksgiving. Even though his eyes were closed, he caught glimpses of bright lights playing on the ceiling, knew that squad cars with searchlights were outside.

"The place is surrounded!" Toro gasped. "We're taken."

From the grenades, the gas poured into the laboratory in a blinding, choking, torturing flood.

## CHAPTER V

**T**HE TRIP to the police station blew some of the gas away but it left both men still sneezing violently and still trying to see from eyes that were made worse by rubbing. Both were handcuffed with their hands in front of them. In the station, they were lined up in front of the desk. Behind it a burly sergeant gloated at them.

Flashbulbs were already popping, the news bureau man on duty at the station had already called in a flash on this story and the regular reporters were on their way as fast as cars could bring them.

The contents of Toro's pockets were emptied on the desk in front of the sergeant. Sumner was given similar treatment. No effort was made to remove the handcuffs from either man. Already the headlines were screaming:

### KILLER CAUGHT!

Toro's eyes were red, he coughed

constantly, but he still maintained something of his composure. "All right, boys, all right," he kept saying. "You'll all get your picture in the paper. No need to push, no need to shove." He joked with the men who had captured him, they didn't joke back, but that made no difference to him. "How'd you find out where I was?" he asked.

"A dame tipped us off," a pompous captain answered. The captain was giving instructions to the desk sergeant and was obviously waiting for the arrival of the newsmen before booking the prisoner.

"What dame?" Toro questioned.

The captain did not answer. In truth, he did not know the identity of the unknown woman who had called the station, but he was not prepared to admit his ignorance. He turned to Sumner.

"What's your name?"

"Warren Sumner," the scientist answered, and waited for the name to be recognized. Somehow he expected this captain to know his name.

"Probably a phony but book him that way anyhow," the captain said to the sergeant.

"Book me? What for?"

"Harboring a fugitive."

"But I wasn't harboring him; he had kidnapped me," Sumner protested, and saw that the captain wasn't listening. Nor was anyone else. The whole big station was crowded with men but no one was paying him any attention. They were all watching Toro. "I want to talk to my lawyer," Sumner said.

"Hub?" The captain gave him a look of disgust. "Aw, hell, shut up. You can talk to your lawyer tomorrow."

"But he kidnapped me."

"Why?"

"So he could force me to send him through time," Sumner answered. It

was the truth, if he had ever spoken it.

A strained expression appeared on the captain's face. For the first time, Sumner had his thoughtful attention. "When did you get loose?" he said.

"Loose—"

"From the nuthouse."

Sumner was suddenly silent. He knew instantly that he should have kept his mouth shut. He saw what he was facing. The pompous captain was not kidding him when he said the scientist would probably face charges for harboring a fugitive. In view of Toro's reputation, and the wide publicity that had been given his escape, there was no chance that Sumner could plead innocent of the identity of the man. And if he claimed he was kidnapped, how could he prove it? If he told the truth— He saw the trap that waited for him in that direction too. In the year 1950 no jury would be willing to believe in the reality of time travel.

THE NEWSMEN and the photographers arrived. Flash bulbs began popping again. Reporters yelled questions. Sumner was elbowed to the side. "Scowl, Toro," a photographer yelled. Toro scowled accommodatingly. "Grin, Toro." it was a lop-sided grin with no mirth in it, but he tried it. He seemed to be willing to do anything for the reporters. The pompous captain was in seventh heaven.

"Want one of me lighting a cigarette?" Toro asked.

"Sure," the photographer yelled.

Toro leaned forward, picked up the crumbled package from among his belongings on the desk top. His hands were cuffed together but he managed to extract a cigarette and stick it between his lips. Grinning, he reached for the lighter.

And Sumner at last understood why Toro had co-operated so willingly with

the reporters and the photographers. Every action he had taken had been directed toward this moment.

"Watch him!" Sumner screamed.

Even if they had known what to watch, his voice was too late. Toro already had the lighter in his hands. He used it at full power.

The head of the pompous captain vanished in a blur of red mist. His headless body fell like the chunk of dead meat that it was. Toro turned the lighter in another direction. A photographer with his camera ready to shoot did not get the picture of the killer lighting a cigarette. In a half crouch, he stumbled and went down. Behind the desk, the sergeant reached for his gun. He did not complete the motion.

The jammed police station was suddenly a bedlam of sound. Sumner threw himself flat on the floor. Around him men were falling like trees growing down. Toro had turned on the death-dealing Kovenair beam at full power. At full flow, it was as deadly a weapon as has ever come from the brain of inventive man. At close range it literally dissolved tissue, made flesh creep and crawl. At longer range, ten feet or more, men were knocked unconscious, blistered, and badly burned. Whether or not the falling men were dead Sumner did not know. Toro certainly did not care. He used the lighter like a spray.

One cop got his gun free. It barked once. Toro turned the lighter toward the cop. The gun did not bark again.

The room was suddenly empty of men on their feet. At the rear a detective was trying to crawl. Toro saw him, lined up the lighter. The spray of light lanced out. The detective screamed and went limp to the floor.

Toro grunted with satisfaction. Bending down, he searched the pockets of the dead captain until he found a set of keys. He grunted again, ap-

plied the keys to the cuffs on his wrist. A key fitted. The cuffs came free. He threw them across the room, looked around again. His eyes came to focus on Sumner. He bent over.

"Okay, get up. You're not hurt."

Sumner rose to his feet. Toro unlocked the cuffs from his wrists. "Come on," he said. Sumner followed him. Outside, Toro moved toward the nearest police car parked at the curb, opened the door, slid behind the wheel.

"Where are we going?" Sumner questioned.

"Back to your lab," Toro answered. "I got away this time but I was lucky. Next time I won't be so lucky. Next time they'll shoot first and take pictures afterward."

"But they will trace you by this car."

"Sure. They'll trace me to your lab. But by the time they get there, I'll be gone."

WITH THE siren going full tilt, he drove the car through the streets. Traffic got out of his way just as it would have gotten out of the way of any other police car. Brazenly he drove the car up to the front door of the lab. "They probably left a guard staked out here," he said. "That's the way they work. Ah, here he comes now, like Rover looking for a burglar. Well, he's found one."

The policeman came on the run toward the squad car. He thought it was occupied by his own kind. As he came up Toro lifted the lighter.

The cop died without a sound.

They went unmolested up the stairs and turned on the lights. The odor of gas still lingered in the laboratory. "Get busy," Toro said.

Sumner nodded. His mind was already made up. He turned current into the time machine, checked its function as it warmed up. "What was that



year again?" he asked.

"2930," Toro answered. "And no tricks."

"There will be no tricks," Sumner said. "You asked to go back to your own time. I'm sending you there."

Toro stepped into the machine, slid into the seat. Somewhere far off in the night a siren began to howl. Toro cocked his head to one side, listening. The siren went into silence. "Maybe coming here, maybe not," the killer said. "Well, they'll never get me. Is this the way I turn on the juice?"

"It is," Sumner said.

Toro shoved home the switch.

The transformer hummed heavily as it sucked power from the lines. The framework of the machine began to glow and flicker like a neon light trying to turn on.

Toro went out of time like a ghost going out of existence. He became insubstantial. Then he was gone. Gone like a man going into nothingness, gone across a dimension interspace, gone back to his own time. The machine cut off automatically, automatically it reappeared. The seat was empty. Toro was gone.

Long after the current had been cut off Sumner stared at the space Toro had occupied. The girl came out of the darkness of the laboratory and stood beside him. He looked around at her. "Hello," he said. He was not surprised. It seemed natural for her to be there.

She was the girl with the violet eyes.

"Did you tip off the police?" Sumner said.

She nodded. "I was trying to find you again. I thought, when you regained your memory, you would be sure to return here. So I watched and waited. You came with him."

He was silent. She was silent. When she spoke, her voice was odd. "I heard you say he was going back to his own

time?" He nodded.

"But—" she hesitated, her voice faltered into silence, then came again. "The law—"

"I know," he said. "I developed the time equations from the original law which says: *Two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time.*" This had been his starting point on the time equations. The law was valid. But from it another law could be deduced.

The girl's face whitened. "The same body—" Again she faltered.

"I know," Sumner said. "*The same body cannot occupy the same time twice.* This means you cannot appear twice in the same time. If you have lived from January through June of the year 1950, you cannot go back in time and live this period over again. That section of time is forever barred to you. You can go around it, to reach a year you have not previously occupied, but you cannot go back to a time in which you have already lived. If you did, you would meet yourself. Hence the law."

"But Toro—" She could go no farther.

"I know," he repeated. "He insisted on going back to his own time again. . . . In doing this, he violated the law." His voice sank into silence while he thought of what happened to men who violated nature's laws. Man-made laws could sometimes be violated with impunity. Nature's laws—never. Nature always exacted her penalty.

"What do you think happened to him?" she whispered.

"When the machine released him, in his own time, he was in violation of the law. He could not occupy that time again. I think—mind you I don't know for sure—but I think he was forced entirely out of time, completely out of our space-time continuum. What happens when two bodies try to

occupy the same space? One gets pushed aside into some other space. What happened to Toro when he tried to occupy the same time twice? He got shoved aside, into some other time." He tried to think of what had happened to this violent killer, then tried not to think of it. It had been a ghastly end, he suspected. Toro's twisted, distorted, wretched body had been shoved into sub-space, in effect. It had been hurled out of existence altogether.

**SUMNER SHUDDERED.** The picture would haunt his dreams for many nights to come. But he knew Toro had gotten exactly what was coming to him.

"Yes," the girl said. "He had earned what he got."

"Who are you?" Sumner spoke.

"I'm a sort of guard," she answered.

"Guard?"

"Yes. There's a missing period in your life."

"Two months," he said.

"You spent that time in the future. Developing the time equations and building a time machine, you came forward to the future. We recognized you for who and what you were and tried to make you welcome. But you would not stay in our time. You didn't like it there. You insisted on coming back here. We sent you back. I came ahead of you, to help you."

"You volunteered for this task?" he said.

"Yes. It wasn't a task, it was an honor. To a few of us in my time, you were a sort of a god, to the scientists, to the real thinkers. We sent you back as near to your own time as we could. In this case, two months was as near as we dared to try for. Otherwise, we might have miscalculated, and send you back into a time you had already occupied. If that had happened, you would have vanished like

Toro." She shivered, forcing her mind away from his thought.

"Thus to you there were two months missing from your life."

"I can't remember the future," he said. "I can't...."

"Who can?" she answered. "There is some kind of a psychic block that keeps you from remembering, or at least from remembering clearly. Later, after a week or two, we can remember better. I came back ahead of you. When you returned, I was waiting. But you did not remember me, you couldn't, from the very nature of the mental block in your mind. When I met you, I could see you were in some kind of trouble. I tried to help you but you did not understand what I was doing."

"I see," he said. He still could not remember. His mind was busy with other things.

"Also, I was curious," she said. "About you. Much is known about you, but much has been lost. The time equations that you developed were not really used until over two hundred years after your original life time. Then they were rescued from the long-forgotten technical publication that printed them and their value was at last understood and recognized. But you, Warren Sumner the man, remained a mystery. You vanished from history. Why?"

He nodded. He was pretty sure now, that he could tell her why. It was a complex problem and it was tied up with his dislike for the time in which he lived. He moved toward the heavy chest at the back of the room. How close was the squad car that Toro had heard? Or had it gone on another call? Whether it was coming here or not, certainly a tremendous search was beginning, for Toro and for him.

"What are you going to do?" the girl questioned.

"I think I have known all along

what I was going to do," he answered. He opened the chest, began to take objects from it. A rifle with cartridges. An axe, a hatchet, a whole case of hunting knives. There were other tools, needles, thread, bolts of stout cloth, such things as an explorer in a primitive world might need. Or a man going into the dawn of history. The girl watched him.

"You're going back into time?" she whispered.

"Yes," he answered.

"So that is the solution to the mystery about you! You went into the past. You left your time machine here, but nobody understood what it was."

"That's right, I guess."

"But why did you go back into the past?"

"Why?" He fumbled with the word, tried to find other words that would explain his motives. "Down on the street there is a squad car and dead policeman. Sooner or later, they will be discovered. The trail that starts there will lead inevitably to me. I shall be captured. I shall be recognized as the man who was with Toro when he disappeared."

"Can't you explain?"

He shook his head. "No. Any explanation I could give would get me either the penitentiary or the insane asylum. Before they took me to the penitentiary, the police would literally beat me to death, or hound me to death, trying to find out what had happened to Toro. If I tell them what really happened, they won't believe it. If I don't tell them—" He shook his head. "No. Anyhow I've always wanted to live in some other time, when the world was cleaner and fresher and better. That's where I'm going."

Outside, on the street, tires screeched. The sound was not repeated. A car had stopped there, sud-

denly. From the distance came the roar of a racing motor. He began quickly to move the contents of the chest to the time machine.

The girl came with him. "I—I—Do you mind if I go too?" she said.

"Do I mind?" He hardly knew what to say.

"I feel the same way you do, that the past world is cleaner and better. I would like to see it, to live in it, with you."

He grinned. "There is nothing I would like better."

Moving the switch over to the B position, he set the time dial, then turned power into the equipment. The girl stood very close to him. There was no hesitation in her manner, no faltering. Where he went, she was going. He liked that.

The glow came up around them like a protecting and concealing flame.

WHEN THE nervous police came up the stairs, they found an empty laboratory. But they didn't find Mike Toro nor Sumner.

The newspapers carried headlines: Killer Eludes Police. Riot in Police Station. Hunt Still in Progress. Obscure Scientist Missing.

Neither the police nor the reporters were ever able to make sense out of the equipment in the laboratory. As for Sumner, in the year 1950, he was a minor figure, unimportant. True, he had developed the time equations—but nobody understood them. In the future, he was known as the inventor of time travel, his name was honored, he was a scientific colossus walking across the pages of history.

The mystery of his disappearance was never solved. Here and there a few discerning souls, reading aright the signs he left behind him, may have guessed what happened to him. But they, like he, are in a minority, and are unimportant.

# The Triggered Jet-Engine



By JUNE LURIE



**T**HE SIMPLEST combustion engine ever built by man is the ram-jet. This ingenious modification of the V-1 bomb of World War II is currently strongly in the military eye. It consists of essentially nothing but an open-ended cylinder. Through the side of the cylinder sticks a pipe which sprays kerosene, gasoline or ground up rubber boots—almost anything will do for fuel—plus an ordinary spark plug for initial ignition.

There is one catch to this powerful ram-jet; it won't work unless air is pouring through the front end of the tube at several hundred miles an hour! The V-1, a modified ram-jet was catapulted into the air. This is awkward and dangerous.

Researchers of the Navy and Air Force seem to be well on the way to licking the problem however. They mount a small rocket in the open end of the "flying stove-pipe" which sends a hurricane of high speed air through the hollow tube. This is enough to set the ram-jet into action. By

such a simple trick this promising machine looks like it will be one of the principle contenders for future high-speed records.

For any eventual war, the cheapest most efficient instruments are the best. Rockets are fine but they're costly and difficult to build besides being cantankerous to operate. The simple open-ended ram-jet seems an ideal solution to the power plant of guided missiles. Cheap and powerful with hardly any mechanism to get out of order, they can be rained down by the hundreds in an attack. Their drawback—high fuel consumption—may be vanquished too, if certain other researches work out.

These jet engines remind a person of squids ejecting fluid backward through the water, or of flying cannon driven by their own explosions—a case of being lifted by their own bootstraps. As a result the whole technique is called "Operation Squid."

\* \* \*

## Pass The Neutrons, Junior!



By JOHN WESTON



**N**OWADAYS KIDS have everything. Among the toys available to the ten to fifteen year-old group (and their fathers) are such toys as radio kits, television kits, engineering kits, photo-electric cell kits, and God knows what else. Practically everything done in the industrial world is duplicated in toyland in one way or another.

But now they've got a Junior atomic physicist's kit!

Well, it's not quite that. Junior can't really make any atomic or hydrogen bombs, nor can he blow up the living room. But the set which is being pushed by a manufacturer features complete facilities for doing things which a short while ago were the prime concern of the college physics laboratory.

The toy (it seems a shame to call it that) is an ingenious assembly of these basic items: A Geiger counter, a Wilson cloud chamber, a spinthariscopes, electrical devices, and certain radioactive materials including uranium compounds!

With this toy, a boy can peer into the wonder-world of atomic science and learn more in an afternoon than many a college sophomore has learned in a semester. The Geiger counter, a perfectly valid instruments detects atomic radiation just

like the big ones in the laboratory. The Wilson cloud chamber, a simple rubber expansion bulb permits the young experimenter to see the trails of atomic explosions and the tracks of elementary particles just like the great Wilson did not so many years ago! The spinthariscopes shows light-tracks too and the uranium minerals provide harmless sources of atomic radiations.

Thus, using a kit like this, a boy can delve into the so-called esoteric realms of nuclear and atomic physics and see an incredible world unveiled before his eyes. You may be certain that this golden assembly of intriguing instruments will definitely be duplicated by oldsters who haven't had a chance to see the miracles of the physics lab.

It is hardly believable, this wonderful profusion of scientific machinery and apparatus that a boy may have. What will the toys of the future be like? How can they possibly exceed the fascination of such things just described? Naturally we can't even guess, but it wouldn't be safe to take a bet against the Juniors of nineteen-eight-five having home cyclotrons around the house! People once said the United States was a nation of mechanics; this time, they're likely to say, it's a nation of scientists...

# "I'm a Stranger Here Myself"

*By John Bridger*



"Why—why, it's fusing!" she gasped. "What kind of gadget is that, anyway?"



**If a superior being from space came around to save us, he probably wouldn't get very far without observing our laws!**

*Galactic Outpost 415, Sector A-045, Fringe Equinox 009-000332.2, Constable Buckets Commanding. Subject... Periodic Report I.*

**A**T PRECISELY 3:15 p.m., July 4th, 1950 (Eastern Daylight Time, United States) I,

Constable Groggin Buckets of the Imperial Galactic Regulars, arrived at destination Earth.

The trip was uneventful. Of course, I was hardly aware of the take-off from Home Base—having just been born—but the Crib had ticked off her prescribed twenty-five-year tra-

jectory to the Solar System in precisely the two years' time as computed. Rather enjoyable, too! The Training Center specialists had worked out a really pleasant educational program for me. All I had to do was lie there in the tank and never know it—until, gradually, it was taught to me. The electro-correlators were perfectly attuned to my psychic pattern. It was exactly as if I had been born on Earth and had lived a normal childhood—everything was there: the impressions, the scenery, the Earth people including my parents and the children I played with, the feel, the reality. It was all fed into my mind as the fluid flow massaged my body and developed it within the tank.

And it was a very neat psychological switch to have my father tell me the truth—that I was an orphan, that they didn't think I had been born like other little children. Not born at all! And that no one knew where I came from. That made a game of it. You planted clues in the pseudo-world you had me "living" in that gradually led me to the answer—that it was all a "dream" projected in my mind by the electro-correlators, that I was in a tank inside an interstellar ship, that the ship had come from Home Base....

That I was Constable Buckets of the Imperial Galactic Regulars, dispatched on duty to Galactic Outpost 415 on Earth to maintain law and order under the Principles of the Imperial Galactic Regulations.

And then, of course, the electro-correlators taught me all about the Galactic Empire, about the Free Trade Guilds and the IGR Principles which were created to protect planetary inhabitants within and without the Empire and interstellar tradesmen alike. The Principles dictated that nobody should hurt anybody

for any reason—and it was my duty to see that the Principles were adhered to. Of course, that implies a strict Galactic Jurisdiction. Any matters not of interstellar scope are beyond my official bailiwick. I understand my position.

With that, of course, I learned about Earth from the galactic point of view: that she was the single really inhabitable planet of a star-system on the outer fringe of the galaxy. She was so far off the trade-routes that she would probably never be approached by a free tradesman—unless he had nefarious reasons for wandering off into the back-regions. Therefore, she needed Regular protection against just such an incident. She was not a member of the Empire, her natives were completely ignorant of our galactic civilization, and *therefore* Outpost 415 must necessarily be incognito so as not to unduly alarm the natives.

Wherefore and to wit, I had been specially bred—rather, I was the end-product of a hundred generations of breeding—to conform physically to the standards of the Earth natives. I was human. I was also thoroughly and completely trained from the moment I was born—in the perfectly planned and controlled "pseudo-environment" created by the electro-correlators—and I was capable of doing the job. I would spend half my life—five thousand years, Earth time—performing this job, alone in this isolated sector, completely cut off from the rest of the Empire. Virtually cut off, anyway—it takes two hundred years light-speed to exchange one single message with the nearest Empire trade-world. Precious few messages are worth sending when you have to wait two hundred years for an answer.

**BY** THE time the Crib was out of multiphase and running at half



light-speed, I was out of my tank and preparing for arrival. It was certainly a delight to be actually using my body, instead of just lying in a tank and feeling the sensations of using it. I took the controls and warped the Crib into an orbit at right-angles to the ecliptic plane of the Solar System, so she would swing up over the sun and down through the System, under the sun, and back up through the System. My right-angle orbit was coincided to the Earth's ecliptic orbit so that twice a year, regularly, the Crib would pass within five million miles of the planet. Then I closed up shop, unlimbered my little scout cruiser, and took off. Earth was just seven million miles away, then.

Once I had jockeyed into Earth's shadow, I jettisoned the metal cockpit shield with its televue screens and went on in with my own two eyes and the seat of my pants. I skittered the little cruiser down into the fuzzy atmosphere, leveled off, and let her ride off her velocity. When she got below a thousand miles per hour, I could feel the air take hold of her wings and the control flaps began to answer to the wheel. I retracted the rocket tubes into her belly and tipped over on one wing to look around. My dead reckoning had brought me in on an eastward glide across the North Atlantic. I was loosing altitude at a moderate rate. The North American shore line swept past below and I swung the ship into a long, wide turn.

At twenty thousand feet, I unlocked the forward propellor and geared in the turbine drive. I thought it highly commendable of the Ordinance specialists to give me this facsimile Earth-type plane as a scout cruiser, rather than the conspicuous disc-drive saucers our first expedition was equipped with. At least, I wouldn't get shot at!

I was still flying by instinct and

observation, not relying on the ship's air pressure and magnetic instruments until I'd had a chance to check them against the planet's conditions myself. I had circled three-quarters of the planet's surface, braking speed, and the rolling, green countryside below was cloaked in the warm, slanting light of early afternoon. I spotted a broad stretch of meadow, tipped into a dive, and went down for a landing.

It wasn't so good. The meadow was wide enough, but I didn't have any nose or belly jets—I wasn't on rock-ets—and this business of riding behind a howling windmill was all new to me. I overshot a bit, came down too far across the meadow, touched the wheels gently to the turf, and went head-on into a clump of trees on the hillside.

**P**EELING myself off the instrument panel, I unsealed the glass-ite cockpit canopy and threw it back. My safety belt had held, but the shoulder straps had broken and I had the clear imprint of the control wheel on my chest. Movement was entirely instinctive. It was several minutes before I got my breath back and little pinwheels of fire stopped whizzing around in my skull. Then I switched off the turbine drive, cut the oxygen valves to the cockpit, threw a leg over the side, and sat up to survey the damage. My port wing was folded around three closely-grouped trees. The propellor blades were bent around another. By the sharp cant of the ship, I knew the landing gear was badly sprung. I could still unlimber the rocket assembly and blast my way out of there, but that might attract the attention of surrounding inhabitants. Otherwise, I had a major overhauling job on my hands.

I was, I knew, somewhere in that

geologically ancient mountain range that runs down the East Coast of North America, and my latitude placed me somewhere within the United States. The vague data I had to rely on implied that such a region would abound in farmers' daughters and hillbillies who brewed corn likker and raised hogs.

I decided it would be best to find one of these local natives, persuade him to bring his team of mules and pull my ship clear, and make on-the-spot repairs. This would cause no undue alarm and would give me the experience of direct contact with the natives. Furthermore, I might learn a few things in this backwoods area that it would be dangerous *not* to know in the civilized regions!

And anyway, I was finally here on this green, verdant frontier world! I was two thousand years from the nearest galactic trade-world, completely isolated, entirely on my own! What more challenge could a man ask?

Bones creaked and muscles groaned as I climbed achingly to the ground. I walked uncertainly down the short slope to the edge of the meadow and looked around. Everything was utterly silent, desolate. Just trees, grass, bushes and dandelions. Not a human, not a house, not even a cow or fence. Then a frightened blue jay gave a brief, sharp chatter in the trees across the meadow and went flittering away on a sunlit flash of blue wings.

I started out along the edge of the meadow. Maybe, I thought, I could find a road somewhere.

But I was feeling fortunate at having landed—or attempted to land, rather—in this region. People living back here in the hills wouldn't know what parts or instruments a conventional airplane ought to have. I could repair my ship openly, even letting them watch if they were curious, and

they wouldn't suspect anything at all out of the ordinary. Definitely, then, I ought to make my repairs right here.

I found the road after crossing a low ridge at the side of the meadow. It was no more than a two-wheel dirt road, but that was no more than I expected. I turned up it, still walking, and mused upon its likely termination. It would probably terminate in the dirt yard of a log or clapboard farmhouse. There would probably be a couple of hogs, a farmer, a cider jug, and perhaps a chicken lying in the shade of the porch. I breathed deeply of the clean, fresh air, swung my arms freely at my sides, and swaggered along thoroughly enjoying myself. It was a nice, warm day.

The road wound up through the low hills, along grassy shoulders and through cool, tree-shaded ravines. I must have walked a good mile, just getting the kinks out of my legs, when I heard the splashing of water. Then I noticed there was a murmuring, too, of a swift stream or brook. It came from behind a thick row of trees and brush.

I smacked my lips in thirsty anticipation and headed for it.

**T**HEN I heard the splash again! I stopped. It sounded suspiciously like some heavy body striking the water. Beavers? I didn't recall beavers being noted as natural inhabitants of this area. Or were they?

I approached with astute caution, parted a bush, and peered out upon a small, deep pond through which flowed a small stream.

I observed, upon a fallen log jutting out from the bank directly below me, several articles of rather scant garments.

I observed, swimming in the clear water of the pond, the nude figure of a girl. She had brunette hair and blue

eyes. She was apparently between 20 and 25 years of age, had an attractive oval face with rather full lips and a short nose, and her body beneath the water displayed certain definite glimpses of symmetrical beauty. She was also a rather good swimmer.

And there I squatted, peering through the bushes, trying to accept this scene with some sort of comprehension. I recalled, in my pseudo-childhood, that boys often went out to "the ole swimmin' hole" and swam unclad. But I couldn't quite picture it as a means of adult entertainment. Everything I knew regarding Earthling adults pointed to an extreme prudishness with regard to such means—though they were far more liberal about other aspects.

Yet here, definitely, was an adult woman swimming in the nude! This contradicted my previous knowledge rather sharply. I wondered, then, if the other aspects I'd been taught would hold true. I immediately felt an intense curiosity. Would this young woman—as I had heard many adults did—enjoy having a male companion join her?

I crawled backward and stood up, brushing the dirt from my hands. There was, of course, one way to find out. I was an adult male.

I unzipped my flexible and crawled out of it. The gritty soil was hot against my bare feet, hastening me to plunge into that cool pond. Hanging my coverall garment on a convenient bush, I went stepping gingerly through the sharp leaves and twigs of the bushes and trees. I reached the bank and walked out on the fallen log.

Thus, for the first time, an Earthling human saw me.

She appeared somewhat startled.

**H**ER EXPRESSION, in fact, was really shocked. I wondered if

perhaps she had developed a cramp! However, it seemed an excellent opportunity to discover how well I had learned their English language.

So I said, very cordially: "Good afternoon!"

To my surprise, her expression altered to display a wrathful indignation. "Very smart!" she snapped loudly—I understood her perfectly. "Very smart! I suppose you aren't going to let me get my clothes, now."

There was more, I realized, in her expression than indignation. There was a very marked indication that she knew something about me and that whatever it was filled her with complete disgust. I, myself, felt considerably over my depth. I couldn't make head-or-tail of the situation!

So I said: "Of course I'll not keep you from your clothes! They're right here where you left them and you may get them whenever you wish. I had merely hoped you wouldn't mind if I cooled off a bit, here, myself!"

At that, she merely dog-paddled in the water and glared up at me, pressing her lips tightly together.

I smiled and shrugged and tried to look disarming, but somehow I knew I wasn't succeeding. So I turned away, carefully balancing myself on the log, and looked around. The pond certainly looked delightfully cool and refreshing.

Thereupon, without further ado, I flipped my heels to the sky and plunged in.

It was simply wonderful. All the delight of my childhood memories came flooding back vividly—because *this was real!* I came to the surface and floated on my back and spurted water like a whale. Then my mouth split in a grin and I laughed with the sheer joy of it—and plunged underwater once more. I saw the weeds along the bank, tangled in tree roots, and the soft mud bottom below. I saw

the girl's shapely figure bicycling off at the side. I didn't approach her. Her indignation had left considerable doubt in my mind.

The strong current was pushing me downstream and out of the pond. I popped to the surface and began swimming energetically against the current. When I paused, breathing heavily, I was happy to note that I had come upstream to the other end of the pond. This was a perfect place to swim!

So I said: "It's a *perfect* place to swim, isn't it?"

Then I saw that she was making swift, hard strokes straight for the log. When she reached it, she stopped and glanced back at me warily, and—waited....

I frowned at this. It was suddenly quite apparent that I had intruded! Again, my training was sharply contradicted!

"Look here," I said, "I'm terribly sorry if I've embarrassed you! I'll—I'll turn my back if you'd prefer—so you can climb out. Then you can dress behind the bushes."

She stared back at me, incredulously. "Do you mean that?"

"Of course!" I exclaimed. I turned myself about, dog-paddling furiously, and grasped a thick, protruding root in the opposite bank. "There!" I said, with my back to her. "You may leave if you wish."

"That's darned nice of you!" she snapped sarcastically.

"Or else—" I began, turning back—and caught her, half-way out of the water!

**S**HE FELL back with a splash, then glared at me hatefully. "I might have known!" she spoke in a voice trembling on the edge of control. "I—might—have—known!"

I was completely flustered! "Or else—I was about to suggest," I stam-

mered weakly, "that I should be the one to leave, since I've intruded! If you—if you'd prefer not to be near the log, you can swim away and—and I'll get out!"

I was suddenly in a great hurry to get out, too! Everything seemed to have gone wrong!

"I'll just *bet* you would!" she muttered, as if to herself. Then she turned her head and actually screamed at me! "*If you come near my clothes again, I'll—I'll—*" Then she broke off with a sigh, lowered her forehead against the log, and murmured wearily, "I might have known *this* would happen—"

By then, I was beginning to wonder how I should ever get out of this. I glanced about in a sort of daze, until it occurred to me that there might be some other place I could climb out on that bank besides the log. I refrained from mentioning it to the girl, since I seemed to be getting nowhere fast, that way. I merely struck out upstream, swimming out of the pool. Finally, my foot struck bottom and I stood up. The water was waist-deep, there.

Behind me, the girl suddenly spoke. "Are you really serious about not meaning to—to intrude?" she asked hesitantly.

I turned back to her with a scowl. "If I had any other intentions about joining you," I said, "I would certainly have done something about it by now."

She grew pale and stared deliberately away from me.

"As it is," I added dryly, "since you intend to monopolize both the pool *and* that log, I am looking for some other place to climb out of here."

"You can get out on the log," she announced with sudden meekness.

I gave her a dumbfounded stare. My surprise must have been elo-

quent, because she was suddenly grinning at me.

"What I can't understand," she said boldly, "is how you could come out like that without being ashamed! Don't you feel—*indecent*?"

So I stood there with water gurgling around my hips and my mouth hanging open and thought that one over. Obviously, she was expecting me to give some sort of answer. And obviously, I was totally incapable of giving whatever answer a bonafide male Earthling would give.

So I told the truth. "No," I said. "I don't feel indecent. I am not exposing myself to anyone in any indecent manner. I have merely gone swimming in the same pool you have. It's a hot day."

She frowned at this; and, apparently, decided to try again. "Aren't you exposing yourself to me?"

"Not purposely," I said. "I don't happen to have a pair of swimming trunks along. Neither have you, I presume—"

She blushed, then. "*My* case is entirely a different matter," she retorted. "I was alone—I thought there wasn't anyone around for miles—"

"There probably isn't," I argued. "Perhaps the fact of the matter is that I have no improper feelings about you being here, and I had assumed that you would see it the same way." There, *that* should stop her!

She gave a shrewd, knowing smile, without humor. "You mean you don't like women!" It was a statement, not a question.

"That," I said flatly, "is absurd! The only people I don't like are those who can't be trusted. That category happens to come in both sexes." I waded back into the pool and started swimming toward the log. She'll probably start screaming again, I

grumbled mentally. Telling me to stay away from her clothes! Serve her right if I tied knots in them!

"Are you married," she asked, "by any chance?"

I pulled up and grasped the end of the log. "No," I said. "I've just arrived here."

"Just—arrived—here?" she echoed cautiously.

"Yes," I said curtly, then blurted the whole thing out. "I've just arrived from the planet of the flying saucers!"

With that, I heaved myself up on the log, sat down, and tweaked the water out of my ears.

When I looked down, there she was in the water, laughing at me. "What planet is that?" she asked mockingly. "Mars?"

"The planet has no name that you could speak," I said. "It's in another star-system, roughly two thousand light-years from Earth." Then, in spite of myself, I grinned back at her.

She looked away, quickly. "You'd better go—get dressed!" she said timorously.

## CHAPTER II

I GOT up and walked back up the log and, gingerly, back through the bushes. I wiped the moisture from my body with my palms, briskly, and struggled wetly into my flexible. Then I suddenly remembered my ship and the reason I was here—and, at the same moment, she spoke directly behind me!

"Are you dressed?"

I was, but I almost jumped out of the garment with fright. Composing myself, I turned around. She was peering over the bushes.

"Yes, I'm dressed," I said. "By the way—"

"So am I," she interrupted, step-

ping through the foliage.

She was, too—more or less. Mostly less. She wore a pair of shorts that clung wetly and a simple silk scarf tied over her chest. Her feet were shod in anklets and sandals. It was all blue: the scarf light blue, the shorts dark blue, the socks light blue. And her eyes were blue. They smiled as she walked past me.

"I left my lipstick in the jeep!" she remarked rather loudly. "C'mon! Oh—" She turned back with a start. "What're you doing 'way out here, if I may ask?"

"You may," I obliged, meanwhile trying to figure out what was happening to me. I didn't know about that until later. It's something the Earthlings themselves apparently aren't aware of—but the moment I saw her in that scant, clinging garb, I was fascinated by her glowing, physical charm. Before, in the water, when I'd seen her without anything on at all, I'd merely noted that she was physically beautiful. Otherwise, I'd been more interested in her than her body. But now—

Later, I checked on it and found it was an absolute fact. I compared photographs of scantily clad women to simple photographs of completely nude women and discovered that the scantily clad women, alone, affected me with a physical sex appeal. The nude photographs hardly impressed me at all, save that they were posed by rather good-looking young women.

But right at the moment, as I stood there with her, I found it to be decidedly bothersome and distracting. I kept wanting to stare at her, to—well, it was all very improper! It was *embarrassing*! I wished devoutly that we were back in the pool.

"Um," I said, "as you were saying—"

"I asked," she said tersely, "just what are you doing out herē?"

"Oh," I replied airily. "My plane smacked into some trees. It's just down the road here, about a mile. I was looking for someone to pull me out."

She had been eying my flexible, but now her eyes widened. "Your *plane*!"

"Uh huh," I said. "Say, didn't you mention something about a 'jeep'?" I squinted at her, wondering if a "jeep" were some sort of draft animal. But she didn't look, or—according to my teaching—talk like a farmer's daughter. My teaching had been proved twice wrong already, though.

"It's over this way!" she said, leading off through the trees. "You're a pilot, then! Have to make a forced landing?"

"Well," I said, "I had to come down *some* time!"

She laughed at that.

THE "JEEP" turned out to be a small, rugged-looking vehicle. It was pulled in among the trees, which was why I hadn't seen it before.

The girl wriggled in behind the wheel. She was suddenly very talkative. "Then you were just flying over here," she said, as I walked around and slipped into the small seat next to her, "when you had to make a forced landing. Then you went out to find help, and—that's how you found me!" She seemed exceptionally cheerful for some reason.

"That's about it," I said—then grabbed for my seat, as the jeep seemed to explode under me!

The next thing I knew, we seemed to be flying from bump to bump over the narrow dirt road.

"This is my brother's jeep!" she said over the roaring engine. "He went to a 4th of July blow-out with some other ex-G.I.'s, so I got the jeep—" The jeep slewed sideways as she took a hairpin turn. The speedom-

eter needle was glued to fifty.

"Were you in the war, too?" I shouted.

"NO!" she exclaimed mirthfully. "I was still in pigtails, then! Were—"

"You drive like a messenger for an Armored outfit!" I growled sardonically.

She slowed down, obligingly. "Bill taught me—that's my brother," she explained. "Were you in the war?"

"No," I said. "Not with the Armed Forces, anyway." Which was true enough. I shuddered to think of trying to explain that, by Earth time, I hadn't been born until two years ago—that I had lived 25 years in multi-phase travel beyond light-speed, crossing 2000 light-years' distance—and had arrived here just two years after departing by *Universal time*! I'd have to explain that terrene matter was transmuted to contraterrene matter beyond light-speed and that time—

No, an explanation was impossible.

"Not with the Armed Forces?" she persisted querulously.

"I—worked for another government," I said haltingly. "A democratic government, I might add. Foreign intelligence work." Which, speaking for my own race, was even more true than she could ever guess. Speaking for myself, it was a bald-faced lie. I felt my first twinge of conscienceness.

"My!" she exclaimed, giving me a bright side-glance. I faintly suspected that she didn't believe me.

"Over that next low ridge, just up ahead there!" I directed.

"All right!"

I thought her "all right" to mean that she would stop the vehicle and we'd walk over to the meadow—but no! A twist of the wheel, a roar of engine, and whoosh—up we went over the ridge and down to bounce roughly across the meadow! She saw my ship instantly and headed straight

for it.

We slid to a dead-engine halt and she was out with a flash of legs and walking up toward the plane. I pulled myself achingly from my seat and followed.

"You certainly did have a crash landing, didn't you!" she exclaimed.

"Warped a few mechanical braces," I admitted lightly. "If I could just pull her out of there, I'd—"

"Looks like a complete overhaul job, to me!" she announced seriously, eyeing the crumpled wing. "What you need is a flat-bed trailer-truck to come in here and haul it down to the airport!"

I felt a cold chill creep down my spine. "Is there an airport near here?" I asked, trying to keep my tone casual.

She turned to me with a frown. "Don't you *know*?"

"I'm afraid I'm—er—a bit lost!" I laughed shakily.

"You mean you wandered off your route?" Her expression was faintly suspicious. "I didn't know there was any bad weather along the East Coast today! The weather reports—"

"I'm—I'm not much of a pilot," I said weakly.

She shrugged, sighed, and turned back to the plane. "Well, anyway," she said, "you aren't going to be able to repair all that damage out here!"

"Sorry," I said, "but I'll have to disagree with you. Now—could your jeep possibly pull me out of there?"

"Why, yes!" she said dubiously. "There's a tow-chain in the back. But—"

"Don't argue," I said. "Please!"

She shrugged. "All right, then. If that's what you want—" She walked back down to the jeep.

**S**HE BACKED the jeep up under the tail and I fastened the tow-chain to the jeep's trailer-clamp and



hooked it around the plane's right wheel. The nose wheel would keep the plane from twisting out sideways, I decided. Then I told her to go ahead, but take it slow, and we pulled the plane back down onto the meadow.

That much was done. But I'd had time to think things over. I definitely did not want to begin on-the-spot repairs with that girl around! Farmer's daughter or not, she knew entirely too much! I unfastened the chain and tossed it into the back of the jeep, then went back to the plane, climbed up on the wing, and began gathering my personal articles from the compartment behind the seat.

I could tell her I had to go get some help, first. I'd ask her to drive me to that airport—that was it! Then, when she'd dropped me off, I'd hitch a ride somehow and come back to make repairs.

I had it all figured out! I was bent over the cockpit, reaching into the rear compartment. I didn't see her until I heard the gasp, directly across from me. I looked up to find her standing on the opposite wing-root, staring wide-eyed into the cockpit, staring with horrified realization straight at the instrument panel!

I ducked my head quickly and pretended I hadn't noticed her. I had an armload of toiletries and shaving kit, and reached into the bottom of the compartment for my valise.

Then she spoke. Her voice was trembling slightly. "Did you say—*two thousand light-years?*"

I heaved a sigh of defeat and began stowing my gear back in the compartment. The die was cast. She knew!

Then she gave a faintly hysterical laugh, more like a short bark. "But they're all labeled in English! The instruments, I mean, so you must be an Army test-pilot!"

I paused, thinking that over. I could say I was. I could demand that she keep it absolutely secret. But she was an unquestionably intelligent girl. She would demand that I show the proper credentials—or else, contact federal agents who would show her the proper credentials!

"No," I said truthfully, "I am not an Army test-pilot. This ship was not designed by human hands, nor was it built on Earth."

"But—" she stared at me, as if hypnotized. "—you're human!" Her gaze wavered over my flexible. "I know you're human!" she added hastily. "I *saw*—" Then she blushed furiously.

"Yes, I am human," I said gravely. "I can breed safely with Earthling humans. That's why I was chosen to come here! That's why this scout cruiser is designed like one of your conventional aircraft. I didn't want anyone to know I was here from outer space. I can't afford to let them know it!" I gestured resignedly and she shrank back. "I could have used the rockets to blast the ship out of those trees," I explained, "but it would cause an unholy racket and would probably start a fire and I'd have the whole neighborhood down here!"

"But why are the instruments labeled in English?" she demanded.

"Because," I said, "that's the only language I really know. I have a mere 'speaking acquaintance' with a few other languages, but I talk and think instinctively in English. That was an important factor in my training for this post."

"What post?" she asked simply.

"Constable of the Galactic Regulars, assigned to Earth to protect you people from outside interference by any selfish interests within the Galactic Empire," I said.

"You mean," she said, pensively,

"you've come here to fight the flying saucers? Is that what you mean?"

I grinned. "Something like that. The flying saucers left shortly before I arrived." Why should I tell her they were scout ships of our own expedition, sent out to explore this sector?

Then she smiled, mockingly. "Ver-ry smart!" she exclaimed. "So the government now has space travel and you've cracked up one of their ships. Of *course* I can't expect you to *admit* you're a test-pilot! Maybe you were just coming back from a base on the Moon!" The smile broadened to a warm, musical laugh. "All right, Mister Constable of the Galactic Regulars! The government can just keep their little, old secret. We'll just say that you're a stranger here yourself and let it go at that!"

I shook my head slowly, staring at her. "Young lady," I said, "you constantly surprise me!"

"Name's Evelyn Harrison," she said brightly. "What's yours?"

I straightened to attention. "I, m a d a m, am Constable Groggin Buckets!"

She looked at me, turned slowly, and climbed down off the wing. "I give up!" she said, walking back to the jeep.

AT THAT, I couldn't blame her. The name "Groggin Buckets" had served remarkably well to arouse my fascination in my psuedo-childhood—making me want to find out all sorts of strange things about myself, about where I came from, and being thrilled by it rather than horrified. I recall my youthful enthusiasm about that—why, a boy with a name like Groggin Buckets just couldn't lose! I wasn't the least disappointed to learn that my forebears weren't quite human, that *their* forebears definitely *weren't* human!

That any one of my ancestors could stand a 50-g acceleration without a qualm, that they could step out of a plane at 50,000 feet, plunge to the ground, and crawl unharmed from the resultant crater! For a boy of twelve—which I happened to be, at the time—such discoveries were as gifts from Heaven!

But it appeared that, at the moment, a name like Groggin Buckets would be somewhat of a drawback. Miss Harrison drove the jeep around, parked, and watched me make repairs without saying a word, but I could tell she was thinking plenty.

The repairs weren't much of a bother. I got out my maintenance belt, buckled it about my hips, and went to work. I began with the wing. One small tool indicated the amount of sub-atomic flow to be used. Another tool activated this flow through the molecular structure of the wing. Then I just grabbed hold, jerked the wing straight, and shot in enough juice to restore its original atomic fusion and tensile strength. With that, of course, the wing snapped back into its original, rigid shape. I thought I heard a startled gasp from the jeep, but I wasn't sure.

The same was done for the propeller blades and the steel members of the landing gear. Then I went about and treated various torn gaps in the metal skin, restoring their original molecular cohesion so they simply flowed back to unbroken smoothness. The whole job was finished in half an hour. I poked my tools back into my belt and turned to the jeep.

"That's about all, I guess," I told her. "Thanks a lot for your help."

She was almost bloodlessly pale. "Th-that's—that's *all*?" she stammered incredulously. She seemed to be having difficulty in breathing.

"Certainly!" I said. "The next thing, I suppose, is to make some sort

of arrangement with your airport people for landing there and storing my ship. I'll have to look around, sort of, before making any further plans." I was speaking half to myself.

"Y-yes, I suppose so," she replied. Then, "I mean—you're going to stay here?"

"No," I said, puzzled. "I said at the airport!"

She seemed to give that her fullest concentration for a moment. "I see," she said finally. "Then, would you like me to drive you into town?"

"That might be wisest," I acknowledged. "I suppose I could telephone the airport and make arrangements."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, you could!"

"I'll certainly appreciate it," I said.

She looked straight ahead and swallowed. "All right."

**W**ALKING back to the plane, I climbed back on the wing and began fishing out my personal articles again. Gathering them under my arm, I closed the canopy back over the cockpit, sealed it, climbed down, and walked back to the jeep. Miss Harrison started the engine as I dumped my gear into the back. I slipped in beside her and we were off.

We crossed the ridge, turned into the road, followed it about five miles, and swung out on a paved public highway! All this time, Miss Harrison maintained a thoughtful silence. Her features remained blank, devoid of expression, as she kept gazing straight ahead. I frowned at the paved highway and broke the silence.

"Would you mind telling me just where we are?" I asked. "I'm afraid I haven't the slightest idea—"

"You are in the United States of America," she answered sharply, not looking at me. "We are on State Highway Number Six, just a few miles outside Fruglesburg, New Jersey!"

Fruglesburg, New Jersey! Then I was farther north than I'd planned! This wasn't a remote backwoods region, but was within the more populated northeastern United States. As I remembered my geography, the mountainous terrain indicated it to be somewhere in upstate New Jersey.

"I knew about being in the United States," I said aloud. "I landed in this country intentionally. The standard of living, the general educational level, and the personal freedom of its citizens make it preferable, since I'm to impersonate an Earthling human while I'm here."

"Of course!" she agreed shortly.

I gave her a sidelong glance and frowned to myself. The situation, I sensed, was threatening to get out of hand again. I couldn't seem to control it!

It made me feel crestfallen, too, as we hurtled down the highway with the speedometer needle quivering on sixty. This girl was my first direct contact with the planet's natives, and here I was making a complete botch of it. Not only that, but she was a very desirable acquaintance, too—

I caught myself, then. Very well, I thought, let's admit that she's as attractive as a billion-volt electromagnet—if not more so! Her physical attraction was strong enough to have me entertaining delightful thoughts of the most intimate nature! My gaze kept wandering to her youthful figure, to the scant garments which hadn't quite dried yet and still clung. And her movements were so completely honest and natural. There wasn't a trace of pretense about her.

And her eyes were the most surprising blue—

Again, I caught myself. This won't do at all, I thought grimly. No matter how desirable and dream-inspiring she may be below the ears, it was what she had above the ears that I had to

think about. That was the part that could cause me trouble!

I was still trying to fight off the irresistible effect of her physical attractiveness—and still not succeeding very well—when we passed a filling station and motel and seemed to be coming into the outskirts of a town. Ahead, I could see more filling stations and motels, as well as numerous large billboard signs. We passed an open lot, littered with rusting tin cans and assorted junk. I was thankful to have something distracting my attention from her.

"Have you had lunch?" she asked out of the clear sky.

"No," I admitted, "as a matter of fact, I haven't!"

"There's a little restaurant and bar just ahead," she offered. "Our gang usually goes there on Saturday nights. I had a picnic lunch, myself, but—" She threw me a condescending glance. "*—I could use a cup of coffee!*"

"Certainly!" I agreed. "Um, this 'gang' you spoke of—"

"They're a college gang!" she said quickly.

"You're a student in college?" I inquired mildly.

**S**HE PULLED the jeep off the side of the highway before a long, pale yellow stucco building with a curtained glass window across the front and a large neon sign proclaiming: The Half-Moon Bar & Grill.

"I'm a Sociology Major," she announced, snapping off the ignition. "This is a college town, you see. Fruglesburg Tech!"

"Oh," I said, "I see."

"Would you hand me my purse?" she asked. "It's in the glove compartment, there."

I opened the small dashboard compartment she indicated, took out a small red leather purse, and handed it to her. Then, comprehending its

significance, I said, "I have money, Miss Harrison!"

She glanced around narrowly. "Have you?"

"Naturally," I said. I opened the small pocket in the maintenance belt about my waist and showed her the thick roll of twenty-dollar bills. "I came prepared, of course," I said. "These aren't counterfeit, either. A member of our first expedition here advertised and operated a small, legitimate correspondence school for a while."

"Did he pay his income tax?" she asked with a twinkle of humor.

"That, I'm afraid, was an oversight," I replied. "He did not."

She took a tiny compact from her purse, opened it, and began applying powder to her face. It was of a light tint and had a faintly sweet scent. "Of course, being a citizen of a foreign country, he was exempt from federal income tax," she remarked musingly. "But did he apply for proper Immigration papers?"

I shifted uneasily. "There were," I said, "a number of small oversights—"

"Speaking of sights," she interrupted, "you'd better get that money out of sight!" She touched a scarlet paste to her lips.

"A proper precaution," I acknowledged, and stuffed the roll back into its pocket. "Shall we go in?"

She surveyed herself in the tiny compact mirror, biting her lips to smear the paste evenly, recapped the tiny paste cylinder and dropped cylinder and compact back into her purse. She nodded. We dismounted and approached the building. Miss Harrison led the way into a long, dark room and headed back toward an empty booth in the rear. I followed, embarrassingly conscious of the smooth motion of her buttocks within the scant shorts. I wondered if she'd mind me calling her Evelyn.

We dined in silence. She spent more time gazing at me over the rim of her cup than she did in sipping the coffee. I, of course, was studiously consuming two choice hamburgers "with everything" and partook of two cups of the strong, black coffee. I declined cream or sugar. Miss Harrison produced cigarettes from her purse and I graciously accepted one.

"You smoke, too?" she asked.

"Oh, yes!" I replied. "Part of my training!"

"That training must have been very complete!"

I nodded. "It was almost as if I had grown up right here on Earth. In fact, the only memories I have of my own home planet concern a couple of, um, 'visits' I made there in the past few years of my, er, life! I made those 'visits' from my training center, which was elsewhere, you understand."

She frowned. "You mean they completely destroyed your memory of your own childhood and replaced it with memories of a childhood on Earth?"

"That's rather close, I suppose." I gestured resignedly. "It's very complicated."

"It doesn't seem possible!" she mused. "But I suppose if they had a galactic civilization, they'd be capable of doing it." She glanced up, intently. "You know, I'm beginning to believe you really are this Constable Groggin of something-or-other!"

"Constable Groggin Buckets," I corrected with quiet dignity, "of the Imperial Galactic Regulars!"

"Um," she sounded acknowledgment. Then she sighed tremulously. "Well! If you've just arrived here on Earth, I suppose you're going to have to find somewhere to stay—you said you'd look around before you made further plans, though, didn't you?"

"Yes," I said. "But I would appreciate any suggestions!"

"Well," she said, "I suppose we could put you up until you'd got things straightened out and—and knew what your plans were!"

My brows shot up. "Would you, really?" I asked sincerely.

She smiled wanly. "I'd have to ask father," she amended, "but I don't think he'll object!"

"Very nice of you!" I exclaimed. "It would be excellent! You see, then I could get the feel of things without risking any dangerous blunders!" Then I added, sheepishly, "I'm afraid I've already made several glaring blunders, just since I met you!"

Memory brought a faint blush to her cheeks. "Yes," she agreed, smiling. "I believe you have!" Then she looked at me and laughed. She turned her eyes away, quickly. . . .

### CHAPTER III

IT WAS A small, congenial town with quiet tree-lined streets. We rolled into a driveway beside a large brick house not unlike the other houses along the street. Miss Harrison got out and led me up the steps to the back porch. As we entered a spotlessly clean kitchen, she called out, "Father!"

There was no answer.

We proceeded along a short hallway with back to the rear and three separate bedrooms off to the sides.

"Father!"

Still no answer.

I noted with concern that Miss Harrison seemed rather upset. She displayed wide-eyed and pale symptoms of fright, as well as breathing through a lax mouth. I couldn't be sure in the dimly lit hallway, but I think she trembled.

She hurried forward toward the front of the house. "Perhaps," she said a bit loudly, "perhaps he left a note!"

"I followed her on into the front living room. She turned and gave me a pinched, apologetic smile. "Won't you make yourself comfortable? I'll be with you in a moment."

"Of course," I complied graciously, moving across to a deep, welcoming chair.

"Cigarettes on the table!" she suggested brightly—with an almost forced brightness, I thought. I nodded, puzzled, and she hurried out.

I settled myself in the chair and opened the humidor chest on the glass-topped table. There were indeed cigarettes and a silver table lighter near at hand. I lighted one and relaxed, speculatively.

It occurred to me that I might regret having let Miss Harrison out of my sight, but there seemed nothing else I could do without becoming offensive. I wondered, vaguely, why I hadn't kept to my original plan of having her drop me off at the airport, then dismissed the thought abruptly as a vision of sun-tanned torso draped in clinging scarf and shorts rose within my mind. I'd have to watch that, I lectured myself grimly. My own emotions were my worst enemies!

But, as I reflected upon the past hours, it seemed that Miss Harrison had been suspiciously eager to accept my frank statement that I was from another world. Of course, if she knew very much at all about the science of her own world, my performance in repairing the plane would have convinced her that I had a vastly superior science at my command. And she had seemed rather startled, then, hadn't she!

Still, there was the very real fact that native business upon the planet Earth was itself in a rather dangerous condition. There was the questionable activity of that Russian government, that matter of the atomic bomb—all with a smell of war in the air!

Our expedition had concluded that a hydrogen fission bomb would likely be next. I deeply regretted having confided in Miss Harrison—she probably thought I was a Red spy!

Or would that have occurred to her, I wondered. The present Earthling illusions about "standards" of living, "standards" of education, "standards" of personal behavior and everything else blinded them pitifully to the very complex and contradictory structure of their lives, with the result that each of them generally emerged rather well-versed on some one, special field of interest and childishly naive regarding most other aspects. They even boasted a "standard" approach to romance and matrimony, with little regard for vast amounts of possible differences and tremendous problems involved in integrating two people who really don't know each other into a mutual family relationship! They were literally, to borrow a phrase, living by the skin of their teeth—and a lot of poor illusions! They even thought one small group of specialists could compose an authentic "I.Q." test for everyone else! Call it "standardized" insanity—

But such abstract considerations were getting me nowhere. I realized that I simply did not know enough about the immediate situation to make any sound judgment.

I GAZED carefully about the room. The entire rear wall was one complete bookcase, reaching from floor to ceiling. The golden afternoon sunlight flooded in the broad front window, etching the gilt lettering on the books with brilliant fire.

I gave a start, then. All those books, I saw, were large, technical volumes on electrical engineering!

I rose, crossed the room silently, and pulled down a volume. I leafed through it, casting a studious eye on

the many circuit diagrams and photographs. They were all crude, complicated things, designed to apply a meager scientific knowledge to tasks almost too involved for it. Take a little knowledge, and you must construct monstrous machines of insane complexity to make that knowledge go very far. Any one of the small tools in my belt was incredibly simple in design, yet would do far more complex work than any of the massive equipment described in that volume. I shrugged and poked it back into its slot, then glanced around once more.

Miss Harrison certainly seemed to be taking her time! But there was little I could do about that—in fact, the less I did to intensify whatever fears she might have, the better!

There was a small doorway leading off to the side. Beyond it, I could see a small, book-lined room with what looked like the corner of a draftboard. I moved toward it quickly, glanced furtively back toward the hallway, and entered.

I switched on a small light over the draftboard. Heavy drapes were pulled together across the single window and I didn't want to disturb them. A sheet of draft paper, tacked to the board, had the beginning of a carefully inked circuit diagram. What there was of it indicated some sort of grid-trap for electrons in a controlled sequence. My gaze wandered on, surveying the small room.

Many of the shelves along the walls were crammed with magazines, rather than books. There were two comfortable looking chairs and a number of ashtrays scattered conveniently about. A small wooden chest in the corner apparently held the drafting tools and inks, and a metal file cabinet was in the opposite corner. It was cozy, congenial, and thoroughly masculine. A large calendar tacked

to one wall of shelves displayed a radiant girl clad in transparent garments.

But the books in the living room had indicated an occupational interest in electrical engineering. The diagram on the draftboard, here in this small workroom, and the technical books crowding several shelves, indicated an entirely different line—the much more complex field of radio-electronics!

Intensely curious, now, I moved over and pulled down one of the magazines.

I sat down rather hurriedly!

**T**HE COVER illustration on the magazine showed the head and shoulders of a young man, looking cautiously over his shoulder. Behind him, a giant rocket ship was rising into the night sky!

I leafed through the magazine. It was, I deduced, a fiction magazine, featuring adventure stories with some sort of scientific and imaginative background. I recalled our expeditionary data on the writings of such Earthlings as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. I turned back to the beginning and began reading.

It was a story about men who travelled in giant ships at velocities approaching the speed of light, crossing the vast distances to the other stars! In the beginning, the author noted that Lorentz and Fitzgerald had worked out certain mathematical equations and Einstein solved their application with regard to light-speed velocities. These equations revealed that, approaching the speed of light, mass approaches infinity and time approaches zero.

This, then, was not another "H.G. Wells" writing about time machines or invisible men or invasions from Mars. This was an author writing a perfectly interesting story concerning one aspect of the Einstein Theory of Relativity! It was merely set in the



far future, when men built such ships.

My eyes were glued to the pages as I kept reading with avid interest. *Because, you see, this story was almost a parody upon the past history of my own people!*

In the back of my mind, I was setting up a whole new series of factors regarding the potential abilities of these Earthling natives. Many of them—or at least a few—could see through the illusions of their civilization, it seemed. Certainly this magazine was a recognition of the narrow limits of that civilization. And there must have been a half-dozen other magazines behind me of the same nature! There were, at a guess, probably forty or fifty issues of each magazine, making it a collection accumulated over several years! That meant a deeply ingrained curiosity about things unknown, a strong idealism that could carry men to the stars....

I was, therefore, deeply engrossed when a light step sounded in the doorway, causing me to jerk erect.

"Oh!" she said softly. "I see you've found Bill's science-fiction collection!"

"Bill's?" I echoed feebly. "Oh, your brother's!"

"Yes, this is his den," she said. "But if he caught you touching his precious magazines, he'd probably tear your head off!"

"Not really!" I gasped.

"Um-hummm!" She nodded warningly. "He's ver-ry particular about that!"

I whirled, nervously, and poked the magazine back in its place on the shelf. "I—I had no idea!" I stammered, turning back to her. "I was merely—" Then words failed me.

"I understand," she murmured consolingly.

SHE WAS leaning in the doorway, arms crossed, looking at me with a cool, guarded expression. Her fear

or indecision had been replaced by a stiff determination, straightening her small shoulders as she faced me. But I hardly noticed that.

She had changed into other garments. The blue silk scarf had been replaced by a light, silken pull-over shirt with short sleeves. It did even more to accent the soft, rounded swells of her firm bosom. The scant shorts had been replaced by a pair of slacks which sheathed her torso almost to the knees with glove-fitting snugness. It was a brown ensemble, light shirt and dark brown slacks. It went well with her delicately brushed hair, which now was decorated with a bright blue ribbon.

"Would you like to 'phone the airport, now?" she asked.

"The airport?" I struggled mightily to recover my senses. "Oh, about the plane!" I said. "Yes, that would be fine. Your father isn't home, then?"

"He went to a movie," she stated simply. "He probably won't be home until dinnertime." She moved gracefully into the small room and slipped into one of the chairs across from me, tucking one leg beneath her. "Are you sure you can make arrangements for your plane? I noticed it didn't have any markings!"

"Markings?" I frowned. "It doesn't need them, does it? It's not a military-type craft—"

"Oh, but it does!" she protested. "It should be licensed by the Civil Aeronautics Authority and you need ownership credentials showing when it was last inspected—"

"Must I?" There was a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. *Well, obviously*, I told myself, *there had to be some oversights!*

"Why, yes!" she exclaimed. "And you need a pilot's license!" Then she shook her head slowly. "I'm afraid you *are* going to have troubles!"

"Well!" I sighed mightily. "At

least, I'm glad you told me before I called up those airport people! But there must be some way I could get those licenses and credentials—"

"Not very well, I'm afraid," she said seriously. "You'd need a bill of sale, showing the manufacturer of your plane, and a CAA inspector would have to look it over. Then, you have to pass a physical examination and make a solo flight to get your pilot's license. I'm afraid they wouldn't welcome you very enthusiastically at the airport if you—" Her voice trailed off, thoughtfully.

"Well, then," I concluded, "it looks as if I'll just have to buy some private land and keep my ship there, secretly!"

"Father knows most of the people around here," she offered. "In fact, that land the meadow is on belongs to a farmer named McCormick! He might sell it to you. But I was thinking that we might get you in at the airport, after all!"

"How's that?" I asked, immediately interested.

"Well, 'Bill has a private pilot's license," she explained, "and he could vouch for you. From what I've heard, they're rather lax out at the airport, anyway—it's only a small field with very little traffic—and they probably wouldn't even ask about your license! You'd just have to stencil some numbers on your plane. Then you could fix up some fake papers for your plane and keep it locked when you stored it—and nobody would suspect anything—"

"That's quite a risk, isn't it?" I objected. "Suppose one of your CAA inspectors came around?"

I had her stumped for a moment. Then she said, "I don't think they'd question you at all! And besides, if you tried to hide the plane out in the country, someone's sure to notice it! Suppose they reported it? Then it

really *would* be suspicious!"

"Perhaps," I said, perplexedly, "you're right! I—I don't know—"

"Look!" she exclaimed brightly. "Why don't we talk it over with Bill? *He* should know! I'll have to tell him about you sometime, anyway, and I *know* he'll do everything he can!"

"D'you know where to find him?" I asked dubiously.

"I *think* I do," she replied. "We can go look!"

"Would he mind?" I was still hesitant. Somehow, the idea seemed— But then she said, "I'm *sure* he wouldn't!" And jumped to her feet, moving quickly from the room. "I'll get my bag and we'll go right now!"

So I climbed to my feet and followed her, snapping off the light as I left.

IT WAS 5:27 p.m., Eastern Daylight Time, by my Earth-time cuffwatch when we left the house. There was also a gathering of moisture which would probably precipitate early in the morning. Miss Harrison had slipped a long strap over her shoulder, supporting a rather bulky handbag at her hip. We drove through the downtown section in the jeep. Traffic was heavy, both cars and pedestrians. I became rather self-conscious when we stopped for a red light. People crossing the street kept looking toward the jeep, staring at my coverall flexible. It caught the slanting rays of the sun and glowed rather conspicuously.

"Was there a parade?" I asked.

"Oh, yes!" she affirmed absently. "Uh huh! You see, the 4th of July is Independence Day, commemorating America's independence. Freedom for all." She glanced at me. "Do your people have such a holiday?"

"Well-l-l," I said, smiling. "You might say every day's a holiday with us. We take our freedom for granted

—we can, of course! We've had it for several thousand years—"

"Really?"

"Naturally!" I chuckled. "We wouldn't have much of a civilization if each of us couldn't do whatever we enjoyed doing most, and make a profit at it!"

"I'd suppose it would be carefully controlled," she remarked. "There couldn't be any organization if everyone just did what they wanted, could there?"

"That," I said firmly, "depends entirely on how much wisdom everyone has. If they're smart enough to understand what will help people and what won't, they control themselves quite well. And you can achieve that simply by seeing that all the children get a sound, useful education. I was especially well-trained for this position, for example—and I was chosen for the simple reason that they knew I would enjoy it!"

"How could they know you would?" she asked. "You'd never been here before, had you? How could *you* know you would?"

"Don't forget," I reminded her, smugly, "we have a galactic civilization. You'd be surprised at the things we know!"

She said nothing more. The light changed and she shot the jeep forward.

**WE STOPPED** before a square brick building with the large sign: *Fruglesburg Prop-Wash Club—Pilots Only, If Hot.*

"The comma," Miss Harrison commented mirthfully, "was a mistake!"

We entered. The rooms were tastefully decorated, the walls of varnished wood paneling. There was a bright restaurant on one side, a softly lit cocktail bar in the rear, and a spacious, comfortably furnished reading lounge on the other side. A sign point-

ing down the basement stairs read: Bowling Alley. There were a good many couples about. Those who noticed our entry stared at my flexible as Miss Harrison led me back to the bar.

The bar was crowded and noisy. There was a gay, festive spirit and plenty of drinks were flowing. Virtually all the people present were young, about college age, though there were a few middle-aged men. They were all relatively well-dressed, many of them in bright sports colors, and outwardly they seemed well-mannered and tolerant. There was neither stuffiness nor roguishness in their loud conversation and laughter.

That much I noticed almost by instinct. My attention was focused once more on the smooth motion of Miss Harrison's buttocks. The slacks clung revealingly to the curved hemlines of some scant undergarment. It was utterly fascinating!

"Hey, Ev!" someone shouted. "Over here!"

We altered course for a booth in the corner. Several young people looked up, smiling. "Hi, Ev! Hullo, Evelyn!" Miss Harrison was greeted in chorus. One young fellow eyed her hungrily, as we stopped beside the booth, and said, "hiya, Ever-Lovin'!"

"Hi, everybody!" Miss Harrison said, ignoring the young fellow. "Have you seen Bill?" she asked.

"Left just a few minutes ago!" a sturdy, blonde fellow replied. "Gwen was with him—and Hank and Cora, weren't they?" He turned to the others.

"They left together," a pert, dark-haired girl affirmed. She leaned back on the red leather cushions and peered at me. "Who's the character?"

"D'you know where they went?" Miss Harrison asked rapidly.

"Try Smitty's!" the blonde fellow suggested.

The chap who called her Ever-Lovin' gave her a slow grin. "They drove off in Hank's yellow convertible, honey. You came too late!" His gaze switched to me, and he laughed. "What's that following you?"

"Yeah, Ev!" a blonde girl in a tight green sweater chimed in. "What is it? A salesman trying to peddle spun-glass teddy bear suits?"

"I think he's cute!" the dark-haired girl protested amidst the laughter. "Where'd you find him, Ev?"

"Sorry," Miss Harrison said sweetly. "I've got to find Bill—" She turned, took my arm, and tugged me back toward the entrance. "We'll try Smitty's," she said.

**S**MITTY'S WAS a roadside tavern across the bridge from the town's single main street. We parked the jeep and entered the rambling log structure. There was a bar and a dance-floor, both crowded, and a five-piece orchestra on a small bandstand in the rear.

The bartender was fat and bald-headed. He smiled beamingly at Miss Harrison, then shook his head. "Bill ain't been here, Ev! Maybe they went up to the Sun Lake resort. Gonna have a big dance up there tonight!" He looked me over from head to foot, then shrugged indifferently.

We left and drove out the highway. A paved road led up over a steep ridge and we came out of the trees above a small lake. A large, two-story structure rose squatly on the lakeshore. We walked through an open patio, past a swimming pool, and entered the long barroom. The place was hardly full, but there was the beginnings of a good crowd and obviously more were coming.

"Ev! Over here!" the cry went up. We proceeded over to a long table. There were more young people; though the men were more boyish,

boasting loud sports suits and crew haircuts, and the girls were younger, more fresh-looking.

"Hey, what's with the costume?" a young fellow immediately asked.

"Yeah, Ev! Who is he? New boyfriend? Introduce us!" the others babbled excitedly.

"We're, huh, looking for Bill—" Miss Harrison hedged.

"What's that you're wearing?" a delightful, young thing asked me point-blank.

"He's—he's a friend of Bill's," Miss Harrison stammered.

"No need for this embarrassment, Miss Harrison," I said, stepping forward. I addressed the group, quietly. "I am Mr. Buckets, a radiological engineer for a small, private research corporation. This, um, suit—" I indicated my flexible with a gesture, smiling, "—is an experiment we're working on, to find a garment which will cut down the possibilities of radioactive burns. They're for the men who work around atomic piles, doing nuclear research. I'm, ah, merely wearing it to test its practicability and comfort."

"Is it some kind of plastic?" the delightful, young thing asked.

"Precisely," I said, smiling. "As a matter of fact, this has something to do with the reason I'm here! Miss Harrison and I are looking for her brother, you see—we've heard of some ideas he has which sound rather practical—"

"You're here to see Bill about that experiment?" another young man spoke intently. "About that suit, I mean?"

"That's right," I said.

"Bill always was hep on that electronics stuff," this young man remarked sagely. "He can talk your arm off on the atom bomb."

"Well, we haven't seen him, though!" the delightful, young thing

protested, pouting prettily.

"He isn't here?" Miss Harrison asked.

The others vouched that he wasn't.

She turned to me with a shrug. "Well, I guess we'll have to look somewhere else!"

Then, as we strolled back to the jeep, she said, "I see you can lie very convincingly, Mr. Buckets!"

"Merely to save you from embarrassment," I retorted simply.

"Of course," she said.

I glanced at her pale, rigid expression and frowned. "I thought you said your brother was out on a spree with some other ex-G.I.'s," I remarked critically. "Gwen, Cora, and Hank doesn't sound like it!"

"I thought he would be!" she protested. "That's why we went to the Prop-Wash Club. A couple of the fellows there were in Bill's fighter squadron during the war."

We climbed into the jeep. "Where do we go, now?" I asked.

She pursed her lips and thought a moment. "Since he's with Hank Bartlett," she said pensively, "we might just as well try the Blue Devil!"

"Blue Devil?" I was intensely suspicious, for some reason. Something still didn't quite seem right!

"It's a plush gambling joint," she explained, starting the engine. "About twelve miles down the highway."

I was silent until we had skimmed out on the paved road. Then I said, "you don't like this Hank Bartlett, do you?"

She grimaced. "His father has too much money, he owns his own twin-engine plane, and he lets Bill go along as co-pilot—or so he tells everybody. Bill does most of the piloting. You see, Bill can't afford to buy a plane."

"So Bill plays chauffeur," I concluded.

"Yes." She nodded. "Whenever Hank Bartlett wants to go off some-

where, all he has to do is call Bill. Then we don't see Bill for weeks, sometimes. Bill would never drink or anything like that before he got in the Army."

"It's like that, hmm?"

"Yes," she said. "It's like that."

I peered ahead, thoughtfully. "What about this Gwen? Bill's girlfriend?"

"She's no good," Miss Harrison stated flatly.

## CHAPTER IV

WE SWUNG into the highway.

"Would you—" She paused. "Would you explain something for me?"

"Anything I can," I agreed.

She kept her eyes on the highway as the little jeep hurtled ahead. Her voice was rather husky. "How could you just accept the decision of your people to send you here?" she asked; then added, "you gave me the impression that they knew what was best for you and that you had nothing to say about it—"

"Quite right," I admitted, "I didn't! But that's not to say I *don't* have anything to say about it! If I disagreed heartily with their decision, I could simply get into my ship and go back. I can refuse this post any time I wish to, Miss Harrison."

Her brows went up. "And they won't do anything?"

I grinned. "They'll admit they made a rather glaring mistake in sending me out here, is all. No action would be taken against me. Frankly, it would be useless to send a man out here against his will!"

"Of course," she said, "they've carefully educated you to accept their decisions!"

"On the contrary," I objected. "They educated me to make my own decisions! The first decision I had to make was whether I should go back and let them send someone else out

here to take charge of this post. I decided to come, myself. You see, not everyone in the Empire is so well-educated as are my people. My people are the free traders: they virtually spend their lives wandering from star to star, trading with the inhabitants of each. They know the galaxy. But the people on the planets aren't so wise; outside of their own world, they have little and sometimes erroneous conceptions of the rest of the galaxy. Well, sometimes a planet-born native becomes a free trader. Often, then, he doesn't fully understand some of the things he comes up against—and he either gets himself into trouble, or gets others into trouble. That spoils trade. So the Trade Guilds organized the Imperial Galactic Regulars to be the galaxy's trouble-shooters. We keep misunderstandings from developing into trouble which can hurt trade!"

"By 'trouble,' do you mean wars?" she asked.

"That," I said, "is the most frequent form of trouble."

She glanced at me quickly. "Could you stop a war?"

"I could prevent one," I said. "But I know what you're driving at, Miss Harrison, and I assure you that I will not prevent any war from happening here on Earth—not so long as it merely concerns you Earthlings! If you decide to have an atomic war, that's your affair—it's outside my jurisdiction. The fundamental principle on which civilization is based is that the participants make their own decisions."

"And we'll have to make *our* own decisions," she said dryly.

"Exactly," I affirmed. "If you aren't capable of building your own civilization and keeping it, you don't deserve to have it."

"But we can't *help*—" she began.

"You can!" I cut her short, angrily. "You'll just have to find out *how*!" I sighed, dismissing the subject. "Now,

would you mind answering something?"

"Yes," she agreed tensely.

"Your father," I said. "He's an electrical engineer of some sort, isn't he? And your brother—he's studying radio electronics at this, um, Fruglesburg Tech you mentioned?"

"Yes, that's right!" she admitted. "How did—you saw the books at home!"

"And deducted the rest," I said. "Also, your brother has been running around in 'fast company' with this Hank Bartlett—that's how Bill met Gwen, I presume—for the privilege of piloting Hank's plane?"

"Right all the way," she said. "But—why? Why do you ask?"

"Perhaps," I said, "because I like you."

But I had noticed the tremble coming back in her voice. She was frightened again.

"Father," she blurted hurriedly. "Father, you see, is the field superintendent for the gas and electric company. He has been, for the past fifteen years—"

**S**HE PRATTLED on for a few minutes, as we skimmed along the highway. Her mother, she said, had died of tuberculosis ten years ago. Bill Harrison was going to college on the G. I. Bill, was fairly proficient in his studies—but not as much as he could be, if he'd only stop running around—and might someday make a career for himself, if nothing went wrong. Father was approaching the retirement age and it was time Bill took on some of the family responsibilities....

She said nothing particularly about herself and her own role in the Harrison household, but it was fairly obvious. Evelyn had been twelve when her mother died; since then, she had grown into her role as the woman of the house. I carried the future proba-

bility out several decimal places and could see her brother, Bill, eventually landing a job with some airline, moving away to a distant city, and getting married. Evelyn would stay with her father, would probably get some sort of secretarial job to earn their support after Mr. Harrison grew too old to work.

Her background made her prim and money-conscious. She would find fault with the irresponsible nature of most young men her age. She had wonderful chances of becoming an old maid, except for one thing. She was attractive. Some young fellow a bit wiser than others would play her prim, money-conscious game long enough to hook her—afterward, of course, regretting it. But she might grow out of it and become a happily married wife. That is, if nothing went wrong—

In other words, if nothing happened to change her whole life. Such things could happen, and usually came in the form of disaster.

I wondered, vaguely, if I might not be scheduled for disastrous consequences!

There was one nagging factor which continued to puzzle me. In her argument about the airport people being lax about regulations, Miss Harrison had stated that the airport was small, with very little traffic. Yet, if the local airport had little traffic—which meant few planes landed there—how was it that the town had an expensive, private club for pilots?

And if Miss Harrison were lying about that, it meant she had other reasons for wanting to find her brother so urgently. And she was constantly afraid I might suspect what those reasons were!

I remained silent, mulling this over, long after she had ceased speaking. We drove on, wordlessly, into the mellow afternoon glow.

MISS HARRISON entered the Blue Devil with an expression of distaste. Following her in, I could hardly see reason for it. The place was no den of iniquity, but merely a comfortable private club. We had been stopped at the desk in the foyer, of course, and the male clerk had spoken to someone inside via intercom. Bill Harrison was there, and he invited us in. As soon as the male clerk received this information, he was satisfied and pleasantly congenial. We entered the cocktail lounge and could see the dancefloor beyond. The interior motif was decidedly garish, expensive, and fanatically devoted to the Earthling ideas of the ultra-modern, but otherwise there was no tawdiness.

The patrons were generally middle-aged and neatly, expensively dressed. There weren't many, of course, this early in the evening, though the small dining room to the left was well-patronized. The cuisine on the trays carried by waiters hurrying past looked well-prepared; the prices were undoubtedly phenomenal. But there were no hard-faced characters in evening clothes with loud flowers in their lapels and bulges under their armpits. The few young men scattered about had no lean, hungry appearances nor hard, piercing eyes. The man who met us in the cocktail lounge and led us back to the game rooms wore a conservative tweed suit and a cordial smile. We passed no doorways of shadowy bedrooms with walls curtained in silk. We simply entered a small apartment in the rear, the small rooms of which had been converted to accommodate several modest gambling tables. There were no crowds of people, no hawking croupers. It was merely a small accommodation reserved, obviously, for those members of the club who enjoyed a bit of gambling. But behind Miss Harrison's rigid face was a complete loathing, as



if she were wading neck-deep through the slime of all mortal sins.

In the rear of the apartment, however, we came upon a party of four who were obviously intent upon an exclusive drunk. There were several small booths beside a small cocktail bar, and the party occupied the last booth.

AS WE approached the party, I noticed that the people who had been glancing toward me with polite, if coquettish, curiosity immediately pretended to ignore me. And I saw why. The party of four had made this last booth their own den of iniquity, so to speak.

I spotted Bill Harrison instantly. He was a handsome, slender fellow about 25, with Evelyn's dark hair and blue eyes and a hint of the smooth curve of her jawline. He wore rumpled gray slacks and a leather jacket over white T-shirt. He was sprawled in the booth seat with an intoxicated grin twisting his mouth loosely lop-sided. Beside him, a tall, thin-faced girl sat up straight, her elbows on the table, her fingers coiled around a cocktail glass. She wore a tight black skirt and a filmy white blouse with a blue silk brassiere beneath it. Her hair was a tone of brown with greenish glints in it, stiffly curled. If this was Gwen, she wasn't drunk.

The other two were. A tall, hulking young fellow with deep folds of loose flesh pulling down the corners of his mouth on an otherwise gaunt, hollow-cheeked face. His eyes were brown and filmed, his curly blond hair rumpled until it stuck out in all directions. He wore brown slacks, an open collar canary-yellow sportshirt, and a gray jacket. He was slouched back in the seat with a drink in one hand, a cigarette in the other, and a girl sprawled across his lap, half-asleep. She had black hair, heavily lidded

eyes, and a pouting mouth smeared with brilliant red paste. She wore a green satin dress. The skirt was rumpled into her lap, exposing plump legs with black stockings rolled over tight bands that bit into the flesh above her knees, and the top was unbuttoned down the front. She was either half-asleep or, more probably, half-conscious with intoxication. The blond fellow, big as he was and broad-shouldered, hardly seemed to notice that she was in his lap. He kept gawking at me.

Then we were apparently within Bill Harrison's alcoholic limit of vision. He struggled up, wavering. "Hiya, S-s-s-sis!" he greeted laxly. "C'mon—siddown!"

"Yeah!" exclaimed the big, blond fellow. "Been wantin' t'get acquainted wi' li'l, ole Ever-Lovin'—"

"She'sh a ver' respectible girl," Bill observed, twisting around to address his companion. He leaned heavily on the girl's shoulder, but she paid no attention. "Ver' respectible," he echoed.

"Bill," Miss Harrison began, "I—"

"Well, c'mon!" Bill shouted. "Siddown! Don' stan' there!"

"Havva drink!" the blond fellow insisted. "Where's 'at waiter?"

"I—I haven't time," Miss Harrison stammered. "Bill! I want to see you a minute—"

"Oh, *no!*" the girl at Bill's side came to life, looking up at Miss Harrison with a sarcastic smile. "Don't tell me!" she said nasally. "Little Snow White has come to take her bitty brother safely home, has she."

"Lay off, Gwen!" Bill protested, muttering. "She'sh jus' a punk kid!" He glared up blearily at his sister. "Wha'sha want, kid?" he demanded.

Miss Harrison stiffened. "I want to talk to you," she said levelly.

Gwen turned her head just far enough to give Bill a slow, taunting smile. "Baby thithter wants t' talk

t' you!" she mimicked scathingly.

Bill hulked over the table and managed to curl his hand around a drink sitting before him. Then he looked up, sullenly. "Beat it," he said. "Beat it."

"I've got to talk to you, Bill," Miss Harrison repeated quietly. Quietly and—timidly.

"Beat it." Bill mumbled.

"Ah-h-h-h, *shaddup!*" the blond fellow suddenly snarled, lunging forward and swinging his arm out. His fingertips stung Bill's cheek. Bill jerked back, startled. Then the blond man turned to Miss Harrison, still oblivious to the half-conscious girl who was almost slipping from his lap, and grinned. It was a leering grin.

"Siddown," he said. "Siddown an' havva drink, Ever-Lovin'!"

Miss Harrison glanced back to where I was standing, and her face was chalk-white with strain. Then she turned back to the blond. "I'm sorry, Hank," she said. "I haven't time. I just want to talk—"

"Stop whining!" the girl, Gwen, snapped impatiently. "Sit down and drink like a human being for once and stop being such a fish! Or else, get out!"

Bill turned and shook a finger at her. "You mustn' talk li' that t'li'l, ole baby Ever-Lovin'," he mouthed loosely. "Hurts her feelin's. Mustn' talk li' that!" He kept shaking his finger and Gwen laughed.

Hank grinned broadly and started to get up. "C'mon, honey," he said beseechingly. "C'mon an' havva drink wi' li'l, ole Hanky-Panky!"

Miss Harrison started back from the booth, but then Hank seemed to notice the girl in his lap. He grasped her gently by the shoulders and shoved her over into the booth seat.

Then he faced Evelyn, again, and began to rise. "C'mon, honey," he said. "Be a good scout!"

"I'm sorry, Hank—" Miss Harrison backed away from him.

"Aw, c'mon," he coaxed, weaving on his feet. "Betcha a li'l kiss 'ud make ya wanna havva drink wi' me!" He grinned broadly, as though the idea pleased him.

I walked over to them. "Excuse me," I said.

Then, strangely, Miss Harrison whirled to me. "*No!*" she said sharply. She was staring down at my maintenance belt.

"Of course not," I said. I unfastened it and held it out to her. "Hold it for me, please," I said.

THE MAN in the conservative tweed suit pulled him off me. I was thankful for the interference—that blond guy was strong! Then Miss Harrison and I were ushered to the front entrance. Two waiters carried Bill after us, all the way out to the jeep.

"Sorry," the man in the tweeds apologized. "Mr. Bartlett's a member, you know. His father's rich."

"I understand," I said, nursing a small cut in my cheek.

We climbed into the jeep after the waiters had deposited Bill in the back seat. The man in the tweeds bid us farewell and departed. Miss Harrison stared after him, then glanced at me. "Hank would have licked you if they hadn't interfered!" she said in somewhat surprised tones.

"I'm well aware of that," I replied.

She started the engine and tooled the jeep into the highway. "Bill tried to help," she added matter-of-factly, "but when he tried to get up, he passed out! They must've been drinking all day."

On the way back, Miss Harrison kept frowning to herself. Then we stopped at Smitty's. "Wait here," she said, slipping out from behind the wheel.

"Sure," I complied. I watched her figure as she walked into the tavern. She had my belt fastened about her hips.

Presently, she returned with the bartender. "Benny's going to help me with Bill," she said, then introduced us: "Benny, this is Mr. Buckets, a radiological expert. His company's doing research on special work clothes for atomic scientists—like the suit he's wearing. He wants to talk to Bill."

"Glad t'meetcha," Benny said, and we shook hands. "Bill don't look too talkative, at that!" He grimaced toward the back seat.

I climbed out and helped them lift Bill from the jeep. "I got 'im, now," Benny said, and proceeded toward the tavern with Bill curled limply over his shoulders. I turned to Miss Harrison.

"D'you want me?" I asked.

She shook her head jerkily. "I'd rather you wouldn't," she said.

I nodded. "I'll wait out here."

She smiled in weary gratitude and hurried after Benny. I climbed back into the jeep.

## CHAPTER V

IT WAS dark when we drove back up the mountain road toward the meadow. Evelyn and Bill Harrison occupied the front seats; I sat in the back. Bill looked exhausted and sick, which was only natural. He did nothing except give me a long, searching glance when he got into the jeep, then maintained a sullen silence all the way out the highway and up the road. I wasn't too inclined to strike up a conversation with him, either.

Evelyn explained our return to the plane. "Bill doesn't believe me," she stated simply. "He wants to see your ship, first."

I had no objections.

Then, as we trundled up into the

night-shrouded hills, Bill lifted his head and turned back to me. "So you're from the planet of the flying saucers, eh?" he exclaimed caustically.

"Yes, I am," I admitted.

Bill grunted. "Ev told me," he said. "Two thousand light-years away, isn't it?" He was eyeing me sardonically.

I offered no comment.

"There's something Ev tells me that doesn't quite jive, Buckets," he said. "You told her somebody in your first expedition to Earth ran a correspondence school. How'd they manage to do that?"

I glanced toward Evelyn, but she kept her gaze straight ahead. "It was a bit unorthodox, but nevertheless simple," I told him. "Their first objective was to acquire a mailing address. They looked over some rural property, found an isolated farm with a sign on it telling the real estate agent's address, wrote him a letter, and dropped it into a mailbox one night."

"Where'd they get the stamp?" he asked sharply.

"The same place they got the ten thousand dollars to pay for the farm," I replied blandly. "They walked into a small bank in another part of the country one night and simply helped themselves. It was robbery, but it couldn't be helped! Their letter requested the real estate agent to meet them on the farm. He did—and left, bearing the clear memory of having met a perfectly honest farmer and selling the farm to him. That's tampering with a man's mind, too—but again, it couldn't be helped. After that, of course, they could subscribe to magazines and newspapers, order whatever they wished, correspond with whom-ever they wished, and never be suspected. They weren't, either!"

"As simple as that!" Bill exclaimed sarcastically.

"As simple as that," I agreed.

"Then those flying saucers people saw were your ships?" His eyes squinted back at me, suspiciously.

"They were the ships of my people," I admitted. "Of course, most of the time we were here, we took pains not to make ourselves conspicuous. Just before the expedition left, however, our caution became rather lax."

"You were on the expedition?"

"Oh, no!" I chuckled. "I'm merely speaking for my own people."

"Um," he grunted. "You were afraid to make contact with us, then—"

"For your own sakes, yes," I confirmed. "You Earthlings haven't the intelligence to become members of the Galactic Empire, just yet. Matter of fact, our not making direct contact with you was really a test of your intelligence!"

"In what way?" he demanded instantly.

I smiled at him. "What happened when people saw those flying saucers? They grew panicky, didn't they? The newspapers exploded with a flurry of scare-talk! Now, if you Earthlings had intelligence of a galactic order, you wouldn't have become panicky—"

"—Meaning that we'd welcome you with open arms, I suppose!" he interrupted brashly.

"Not at all," I retorted. "You would have been highly indignant about the way we sneaked in and spied upon you! You would have done something about it—something which would have forced us to come out in the open, declare ourselves, and make direct contact with you—"

"And just how," he spoke grimly, "were we to do that when we didn't even know how your thought processes work?"

"There are numerous methods," I said with a smile. "With enough intelligence, you could perceive them! And that's just the point—you don't have that intelligence!"

His mouth gaped open and he stared back at me for a moment. Then he snorted disdainfully, gave his sister a mocking glance, and faced forward.

I began to feel that things were coming to some sort of climax. . . .

WE DROVE up over the low ridge and saw the plane. It sat out in the small meadow, shimmering in the moonlight. Miss Harrison cut off the jeep's headlights and drove straight out toward it.

As we stopped, Bill slid out of his seat and walked up to the plane without so much as a backward glance. I watched him approach the sleek craft and clambor up on the wing; then my attention was diverted as a flash of yellow flame spurted before Miss Harrison's face. She was lighting a cigarette.

"Want one?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

She handed a cigarette and her lighter over her shoulder. Her hand trembled as I touched it. I poked the cigarette between my lips and thumbled the lighter aflame. On the plane, I saw Bill opening the canopy over the cockpit.

"I wonder," Miss Harrison spoke in a soft, abstract tone.

I leaned forward, handing her lighter back to her. "About what?" I asked quietly.

"About you." She turned in her seat, rested her arm on the back, and studied me gravely. "You could have killed Hank Bartlett with one of the things in your belt, couldn't you?"

I stared at her, aghast. "Whatever reason would I have had to do that?" I demanded. "Mr. Bartlett was no threat to anyone's life! He was merely intoxicated, angry, eager to use his fists—"

Her eyes widened. "You mean you won't kill anybody unless it means saving someone else's life?"

"Naturally!" I replied with emphatic puzzlement. "If a man's a murderer and is about to kill someone, of course he should be stopped. If you must kill him to stop him, wouldn't you do it?"

"That sounds very—cold and savage!" she protested.

"This is a cold and savage world," I retorted. "In a civilization, of course we would detect and restrain a determined killer before he had a chance to harm anyone. We have only the extreme cases, however—most factors of society which drive anyone to kill have been eliminated—"

"Prevention before cure!" she acknowledged.

"Precisely," I affirmed.

She became thoughtfully silent, then. I sighed smoke and gazed ahead at the plane, wondering what thoughts were running through Bill Harrison's mind. He was still standing up on the wing-root beside the open cockpit....

Then, I realized what he obviously must be thinking!

**M**Y SCOUT cruiser was an Earth-type airplane in outward appearance only—and that illusion ceased whenever the rocket jets were unfolded from her belly. Once near the ship—once any Earthling who knew his airplanes got a glance inside the cockpit—there was no possibility of him thinking my ship was a conventional plane any longer.

The interior of my ship was strictly the interior of a scout cruiser. The only recognizable objects in the cockpit—to an Earthling—were the control wheel and the seat, and even those were a bit fantastic. The control wheel was mounted around a movable pillar that curved up from the floor into the pilot's lap. The seat was a springy blob of foamflex without any sort of framework, with arms that folded around the pilot's midriff to

keep him comfortable even in eight and nine-g turns.

And across the front of the cockpit was merely a thick, flexible ridge of rubber. On that rubber ridge were the flight instruments—instruments such as no Earth-type aircraft had ever known! Tiny silver lines etched on the rubber surface carried the current to the instruments, which were merely tiny circles of glass beads. Instead of having instrument dials with needles pointing to the altitude, the amount of fuel, the airspeed, the star fixes, the space velocity, the acceleration, the rocket temporal change, and so forth, there were these little circles of bright glass beads. One tiny bead on each circle glowed with a soft blue light, its position on the circle indicating the instrument reading just as the position of a needle on a dial indicates the reading. The advantage of our instrument panel was that a pilot could be thrown against it in a crash without having bits of glass and metal to pick out of his wishbone afterward. The rubber ridge cushioned the impact, with no damage whatever to the instruments. I call it "rubber" of course because there is no other earthly word to describe it.

But in Bill Harrison's case, that wouldn't be the only notable difference. Bill had training in radio electronics. When he saw those tiny, silver-etched circuits around the instruments and tried to puzzle them out, the result was likely to make him slightly daffy. The mere sequence of those circuits was several thousand years ahead of Earth's science!

He would hardly realize that the tiny clusters of lights along the sides of the cockpit could actually control the ship at the mere touch of a fingertip, but he would certainly suspect plenty! I felt intensely relieved that those controls were shut off. His fumbling might have sent him hurtling out

past Jupiter by now—

Miss Harrison's voice cut sharply into my thoughts. "Do you like me?"

"Like you?" I echoed, uneasily.

"Yes. Do you think I'm attractive?"

I found it strangely difficult to form an answer. Though she was no more than a silhouette in the night. I could see the soft, moonlit glints on her dark hair, the milky glow adding an artist's master touch to the soft curves of her cheeks and the smooth, bare arm cocked over the back of her seat. In the narrow space between the two front seats, I could glimpse her slender legs in their glove-fitting slacks. My imagination kept adding the rest. Rather vividly.

"Attractive?" I mused. "No. You're exceedingly beautiful, Evelyn!"

She gave a faint start and turned her head. Her unseen eyes studied me in the moonlit darkness. "Well!" she said. It was a soft exclamation, half-pleased. She seemed embarrassed.

"Perhaps," I added in a jocular tone. "I shouldn't be quite so frank!"

She turned back to the front and drew on her cigarette. "I don't mind," she murmured. There was a faint tremor in her voice.

I gazed ahead to the plane. Bill's head and shoulders were illuminated by the soft glow of light from the cockpit. He seemed to be frozen, standing there on the wing.

Then, without a word, Miss Harrison swung out of her seat and went walking up toward the plane.

I noticed that she still had my maintenance belt fastened about her hips. She was a lovely, graceful silhouette in the night. . . .

Even with the large, bulky handbag at her side, swinging heavily from its shoulder-strap!

**B**ILL CLIMBED down from the wing as she approached. I was gratified that he had presence of mind

enough to close the cockpit canopy before descending. I settled back, comfortably; now, I presumed, we would get this matter settled.

The moonlight shimmered off the sleek hull of the plane. I could see them quite clearly as they stood within the plane's shadow. Evelyn handed Bill her cigarette and he took a long puff, exhaling with a sigh. The night was still and quiet, without breeze. I could hear them distinctly.

Miss Harrison spoke. "Is he a—Russian?"

Bill turned to her, slowly. "This plane was never built on Earth!" he replied huskily.

They stood gazing at each other for a moment. Then Evelyn bent her head and snapped open her handbag. "Here!" she said. Moonlight glinted on blued steel; even at the distance, I recognized the blunt, ugly shape of a German Luger pistol in her hand. "It's loaded," she said. Her voice sounded flat. "Do whatever you think is best."

Bill looked down at the gun, without reaching for it. His voice came faintly. "He's your guy. Sis—"

They stood facing each other in the shadow of the plane. She kept staring up at him, holding the gun out to him. "You know more about this than I do, Bill," she said softly.

I sprawled in the back of the jeep, watching them, paralyzed in my sudden, complete realization. Evelyn had my maintenance belt about her hips, the tools glinting faintly. They were beyond my reach—she had seen to that! And she held the Luger out to her brother. And Bill—I remembered the science-fiction magazines, back in the den—yes, Bill would know more about this sort of thing. . . .

Bill mopped his face with the palm of his hand, stared down at the gun—then reached out, taking it from her grasp.

He came walking slowly back to

the jeep.

His voice was a dull, flat sound. "Get up in front," he said.

I climbed obediently into the front seat as he stood beside the jeep, the Luger pistol leveled in his hand. Miss Harrison approached with dragging footsteps from the plane.

"Take off that belt," Bill told her.

She unfastened it and handed it to him. He tossed it into the back seat and climbed over the side, after it. He sat down behind me, the gun centered on me. "All right," he said. "Drive us back into town." He spoke to his sister.

Evelyn slipped cautiously in beside me and started the engine.

I WISELY refrained from attempting any conversation as we rolled back toward the highway. There was a young man, still slightly intoxicated, holding a gun leveled at my back. He was a rather morose and disillusioned young man, but he didn't lack courage or intelligence. I could quite clearly foresee him taking me to the local authorities, reporting the entire incident, and turning my ship over to them. Thereafter, I should reside behind bars while the matter was referred to state and, finally, federal authorities. The newspapers would get hold of it and, before the government could censor them, there would be a flurry of publicity reaching world-wide proportions. Finally, the government would take over and enforce military secrecy while they subjected me to endless interrogation and gave my ship thorough examination. They would get precious few clues to a vast scientific knowledge—and certainly no assistance from me—but that would be enough for a start. I could see myself confined to prison for a good deal longer than I should care to be!

The situation demanded instant action. Still, I really hated to do it....

The conditions were extremely favorable, though! We were driving back along the winding country road. Trees and brush moved past in the bright headlight glare. The tires made a muffled, gritty sound in the dust. The jeep's engine rattled throatily in the night's stillness, a steady, monotonous sound since for once Miss Harrison was driving at a slow, constant speed. No one spoke.

I experienced only a moment's reluctance. It was a questionable and intricate thing, even under the best conditions, when used against a raw, untrained mind. But in a few minutes we would be at the highway, mingling with the rancorous sights and sounds of the night's holiday traffic, and it would become even more difficult—

I tossed my cigarette out into the road, relaxed in my seat, and concentrated.

Bill's thoughts were a furor of conflicting apprehensions and doubts. I carefully avoided all that. I went straight to his sensory channels and forced open his resistance, letting their sensations flood into his mind with full intensity. In short, I invaded his brain!

The road wound endlessly through the still night, over low knolls and around gentle hills. The trees marched past in the warm, yellow glare, pleasantly broken and irregular in their numbers. Intriguing, yet soothing. The tires murmured in the soft dust, an endless, pleasing sound. His body was tired, shaky. His nerves were dulled and numb from the taxing strain of intoxicated reaction. His mind moved sluggishly. The jeep's engine was a constant, throaty rattle, echoing faintly on the cool, still air. It went on and on....

I, myself, was only vaguely aware that we had turned into the highway—such was my concentration. Our speed increased and tires and engine



sounds blended into a smooth, distant roar. I could sense his eyelids growing heavy, his muscles becoming lax. A peaceful calm crept stealthily into his mind. . . .

I HAD THE gun in my hand almost before Miss Harrison heard the sharp clatter of metal, when it slipped from Bill's grasp and tumbled down between the front seats.

She gave a sharp gasp and her hands jerked on the wheel. The jeep slewed, then straightened and slowly idled along the highway. She was staring at me, at the gun clutched negligently in my lap, with a wide-eyed terror. If I had looked at her, rather than keeping my gaze straight ahead, I think she would have screamed.

Behind us, Bill muttered faintly in his sleep.

"We'd better take him home," I said calmly.

"Home?" she blurted in weak incredulity.

"Yes," I said. "Continue your driving."

She sent the jeep rolling smoothly ahead. Her face was a chalk-white mask of fear. I still didn't look at her, but simply observed her out of the corner of my eye. I yawned and sighed, casually, as though nothing at all were amiss.

"Believe I'll have another cigarette," I remarked, turning toward her. Without looking up, I plucked the large handbag from her side, opened it, and took out cigarettes and lighter. I remained half-turned as I poked a cigarette between my lips, thumbed the lighter, and inhaled smoke. Then I slipped everything back into the purse, let it fall back to her side, and straightened out in my seat, smoking complacently.

The sudden weight that returned to the purse, pulling at its shoulder-strap,

must have told her what I had done. Her head jerked around, her eyes staring at me wildly and her mouth dropping open in utter disbelief.

I was no longer holding the pistol.

## CHAPTER VI

SHE TOOK quite a long time to come around to it, but I suppose she had a considerable amount of shock and humiliation in the way. We drove on down the highway, were passed frequently by cars both from ahead and the rear. The lights of town came toward us and we drove on into the outskirts and turned off into the side streets. She kept her gaze straight ahead most of the time; but occasionally she would turn to look at me, her eyes wide open with frank appraisal and a soft glowing—

Lights blazed through the windows of the house as we pulled into the driveway. Evelyn stopped the jeep, snapped off the headlights, and for a few moments we simply sat there. Not saying anything.

Then I felt another yawn coming, stretched lazily and enjoyed it, and settled back with a relaxed, sleepy sigh. Then I turned to her and, for another moment, we just looked at each other. Not saying a word.

Behind us, Bill muttered in his sleep. I glanced back at him and grinned.

Then, as I started to climb out, Evelyn reached across and grasped my hand. She was gazing at me steadily as she murmured, in faint surprise—

"You really *didn't* mean to intrude, after all!"

So it's quite obvious that I'm now doing perfectly well, thank you, in this assignment. You may consider Outpost 415 quite solidly established.

And, as I said before, I very much do like it here!



# BOOK REVIEWS

By MORRIS TISH

## A Martian Odyssey and Others

By STANLEY G. WEINBAUM

(FANTASY PRESS, READING, PA., 289 PAGES \$3.00)

THE UNTIMELY death of Stanley G. Weinbaum robbed the science-fiction world of a fresh and promising talent. Here was an author who, with his first attempt at writing in this field, gained immediate and enthusiastic recognition. His works had a new approach; they dealt with non-human creatures possessing an alien viewpoint, but yet Weinbaum treated them in a manner which allowed the reader to understand thoroughly their psychology. This collection contains most of the creations that will make Weinbaum's name live: the amazing Martian, Twe-er-r-rl; the pathetically stupid Loonies; that strange example of decadent genius, Oscar the Lotus Eater; those tiny rat-like pests, the

Slinkers; and the parrot-like three-limbed Parcat.

In addition there are the amusing tales of Haskel Van Manderpootz, the eminent scientist whose acid tone and complete lack of modesty concerning himself and his achievements make him one of the most amazing "mad scientists" in science-fiction annals. His hapless Watson, Dixon Wells, somehow comes out at the wrong end of Van Manderpootz's experiments with an engaging frequency.

For every admirer of Weinbaum, this book is a must, and for the reader who is new to his work, the book will be a treat.

\* \* \*

## SLAVES OF SLEEP

By L. RON HUBBARD

(SHASTA PUBLISHERS, CHICAGO, ILL., 206 PAGES \$3.00)

THE OUTPUT of fantastic fiction from Shasta Publishers has been on an extremely high level; SLAVES OF SLEEP is no exception. It is an escapist yarn in the good old tradition; the author has no pet theories to expound, and is not concerned with preaching any morals—he simply relates an adventure story that goes like the wind.

The basis of the novel is the dual existence of Jan Palmer, browbeaten book worm, who is plunged into a series of strange happenings when Zongri, King of the Ifrits, who has been imprisoned by Sulayman the Great in a small copper jar, is released. Zongri places on Jan the curse of "eternal wakefulness" (he has been imprisoned so long, his gratefulness has turned to hate, and Jan is the scapegoat for his animosity toward the entire human race). During his waking hours, Jan lives in our world, but during sleep,

he becomes Tiger, a swashbuckling adventurer in a mysterious world parallel to our own, where magic holds sway, and demons rule over vassal humans.

Jan's life is not an empty one—in our world he has been accused of murder, and faces the imminent prospect of hanging or incarceration in an insane asylum; in the world of Tiger, he revolts against the Ifrit overlords, kidnaps a lovely temple dancing girl, experiences an attempted seduction by the Ifrit Queen (who has changed herself into a highly enticing human female), and finally, again meets and triumphs over the monstrous Zongri who had caused all his troubles in the first place. By the time this thrilling novel is over he resolves everything successfully, and the book ends with his triumph in both existences.

Highly recommended for an evening of top-notch entertainment.

\* \* \*

# I REMEMBER LEMURIA

By RICHARD S. SHAVER

(VENTURE BOOKS, EVANSTON, ILL., 215 PAGES \$3.00)

RICHARD SHAVER and his stories have been the focal point for many controversies. With these the readers of "Amazing Stories" are of course familiar, and the reaction has been mixed. Of those who are familiar with his writings, some scoff, some believe, and some merely wonder. Certainly, Shaver has raised many interesting problems, problems which deserve consideration, and to a certain extent, have received it. Indeed, the Shaver controversy has reached as far as the "Atlantic Monthly", where an article recently appeared concerning the veracity of Shaver's ideas!

Those who are curious about the "Shaver Mystery" can satisfy a great deal of their curiosity by reading *I Remember Lemuria*, one of the most informative and idea-packed stories that Shaver has written, and its sequel, *The Return of Sathanas*, published together in one volume by Venture Books. Both stories are concerned with the adventures of Mutan Mion, an ancient being from a pre-historic civilization for whom Shaver claims to be the racial memory receptacle. In the ancient language which Shaver presents in some of his stories, and which he claims to be

the mother tongue of all Earthly languages, Mutan Mion means "Man spore cultured to new forms by integration growth forces". In *I Remember Lemuria*, Mutan tells the story of the ancient cities of Lemuria, of which he was an inhabitant, and describes life in these cities. In *The Return of Sathanas*, Mutan grapples with the evil god Sathanas (or Satan as we know him), with a titanic struggle resulting. Other characters besides Mutan, such as Arl and Vanue, play a prominent part in both stories. The Lemurian alphabet, given at the back of the book, is designed to give the reader a better understanding of the stories.

I REMEMBER LEMURIA should attract considerable interest from readers who are interested in fantasy. The "Shaverites" will certainly want to own this book, as it is thus far the "Master's" only appearance in hard covers. The skeptics will also desire this volume, simply as a record of one of the oddest crazes of recent years. The undecided will want this book to help them mull over Shaver's ideas. Whatever the point of view then, the publication of this volume will prove of interest to a large segment of readers.

## GREENER THAN YOU THINK

By WARD MOORE

(WILLIAM SLOANE ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK, 358 PAGES \$3.50)

THIS NOVEL, far off the beaten track of science-fiction, will be remembered chiefly not for the plot—after all, stories which have dealt with the end of the Earth through some catastrophe man could not control are fairly old stuff to science-fiction aficionados—but for the magnificent, long-to-be-remembered characters Moore has created.

Miss Frances is the most peculiar "mad scientist" that this reader has ever encountered, a woman who looks like an unmade bed, but who has discovered the formula for increasing the fertility and growth of grass. There is only one drawback—she doesn't know how to stop it. Then there is Jackson Gootes, the flip-pant and heroic reporter who mixes sleight-of-hand with the misuse of every dialect known to civilized man, and is one of the early victims of the grass. There is the great W. R. Leffacase, the newspaper editor whose gift for salty invective makes the reader think of a combination of Samuel Johnson and Rabelais. A sample of his insults follows: "I was a newspaperman when you were vainly suckling canine dogs... I will meet the 'Intelligencers' deadline as I did before your father got

the first tepidly lustful idea in his nulliparous head, and as I shall after you have fouled your useless testes to a worthy desuetude." There is the fascinating Thario family, consisting of the General who could, and did, drink whole saloons dry; his son, oddly enough, the world's last great composer; and his wife, the epitome of all women who long to have their families become heroic martyrs. This intriguing list of characters ends with the protagonist, Albert Weener, who narrates the story and who becomes wealthy for a time as a result of the debacle.

One would have to classify the tale as a satire; there is humor in plentiful quantities, but the emphasis is always on the foolishness and stupidity of mankind, with very few facets of man's peculiarities going unobserved. The picture of the Congressional investigation and the inanities of the government representatives participating is one of the most uproarious bits I have read. In short, GREENER THAN YOU THINK is a novel that the reader will read and reread again. Don't miss getting a copy of this book if you have failed to do so heretofore.

\* \* \*



# The CLUB HOUSE

Where science fiction fan clubs get together.

Conducted by **ROG PHILLIPS**

The first Sunday in March of this year I was present at the big annual meeting of the Eastern Science Fiction Association in Newark New Jersey. You'll turn green with envy at the names of those who were there. Sam Merwin of TWS, SS, and a host of new magazines. Jerome Bixby, new editor of Planet Stories. Jerome, Sam, and I had lunch together the following Tuesday at Sam's lunch club, 4 W. 40th. Sam had only two bucks on him, and while Jerome was fumbling toward his pocket I paid the check. But I'm getting off the track...

Guess who was the principle speaker at that meeting? None other than Hugo Gernsback, father of stf, coiner of the term, "science fiction," and founder of *Amazing Stories*. He is along in years now, but his eyes are alive and young, and his smile turns on very easily.

You could call him the creator of science fiction, though the field would have undoubtedly come into being even if he had not been the first publisher to bring out a successful magazine devoted exclusively to it.

And like all creators, he is somewhat dissatisfied with his creation. In his original conception of a science-fiction story its primary requisite was that it must not violate the current conceptions of science, but, on the contrary, must rise from them into the unknown.

In one way he is right and in another I believe him to be wrong. He is right in that stf must not violate proven facts of science. Circumventing proven things by plausible devices is something else; but too many stories of science fiction violate elementary science clumsily and for no purpose.

All in all science fiction has come a long way in a quarter of a century. So has science. All science, which includes medicine, and even war. Science is a large word. In many ways it's a poor word, because its actual meaning has a way of including much more than the one who uses it thinks.

In the popular mind there is a sharp division \*between the meanings of the words science and religion, for example.

The "war between science and religion" is an example of the type of statement such sharp divisions give rise to. A comparative study of the meanings of the words, science, history, religion, philosophy physics, metaphysics, ethics, logic, occultism, theory, postulate, and hypothesis will give you a sharp insight into some of the broader divisions of human study—and it will do so even if you already think you know the meanings of those words.

I had a room mate in college, Helmer Malmstrom, who used to bring me to a halt in our continual arguments on all subjects by asking me to define the words I used. As often as not I wasn't too sure of what the words meant exactly. I had to go to the dictionary.

Just recently the editor, Howard Browne, caught me up on a word. It was one I had picked up by ear, and never pinned down accurately. I thought it was "unkept", and was amazed to learn the word is "un-kempt".

But to get back to just what science is, and what science fiction is, not all science fiction can rise logically from known science. Some of the very best of science fiction must be strictly classified as pure fantasy, because it will take perhaps centuries for it to become science fiction, under Mr. Gernsback's definition.

\* \* \*

The NORWESCON, Eighth World Science-Fiction Convention, is being held September 2, 3 and 4 in Portland, Oregon. Since John deCourcy was called to California on business Don Day has taken over the reins as Chairman of the Membership Committee. Don reports that the plans have been formulated and the Executive Committee is getting underway with the million-and-one jobs so necessary for the success of the convention.

Ask any fan who had ever attended one of the conventions in the past, and he'll tell you that whether you go by rocket, rail, or hitchhike, the important thing is to get there! You'll meet some of your favorite authors and discuss their stories

with them; talk to editors about their magazines: meet the fans you've gotten to know through this column and their fanzines, and in general have the time of your life. Take it from me, once you go to a convention you spend your time between recollections of the past one, and anticipation of the next one.

One thing I want to mention at this time is that every fan should send in his membership dollar right away. It takes money to stage an operation as large as this, and whether you attend or not you'll profit by joining the NORWESCON Committee. If you do go to the convention, you'll be more than satisfied with the entertainment you receive in return for your membership fee. If you can't attend this convention, you'll at least be helping to insure the success of the largest fan project in the world, and who knows—perhaps the next convention may be held in your territory. In any event, dig deep in your pocket, brush the dust and cobwebs off that dollar and send it to the NORWESCON Membership Committee, Box 8517, Portland 7, Oregon. Do it *now*, while you're thinking about it.

The Buffalo Fantasy League is greatly interested in securing new members. All fantasy fiction enthusiasts living in Buffalo and the Niagara Frontier are cordially invited to join. Anyone interested should contact the secretary, Roger G. Knuth, 37 Kenwood Road, Kenmore 17, New York, or call RI 6639 any evening.

Dennis Lynch, 2834 Carlaris Road, San Marino Calif., wishes to announce the formation of a stf club for boys and girls age ten to fifteen. Those interested should contact him. And please enclose a self addressed stamped envelope so that Dennis won't have to shell out his own money—three cents to you, but maybe three bucks to him if you don't.

Margarette E. Pryor, P.O. Box 664, Wayne, Mich., wishes to announce the forthcoming publication of a fanzine devoted largely to various fan hobbies, the first issue to come out in September. This should be interesting. If you want on her mailing list send your name and address to her.

Charles Lee Riddle, PNI, U.S.N., Fleet All Weather Training Unit Pacific, c/o Fleet Post Office, San Francisco, Cal., writes asking why I haven't reviewed his fanzine, PEON, and seems to have formed the conclusion that for some reason I don't like his fanzine and have deliberately refrained from reviewing it. To quote him directly, "I think you're very snobbish." And though I have been called many things in my time, this is a first for that adjective. Offhand I think I have reviewed PEON in the past in the CLUB

HOUSE, and I can state flatly that Charles is very much wrong. There are two possible reasons why I haven't reviewed PEON. One is that I haven't received it lately. The other possible reason is that it may have been included in a FAPA mailing. By direct request of the FAPA membership I do not review the FAPA mailing sent to me as a member. All fanzines for review must be sent to the CLUB House, c/o *Amazing Stories*. It should be plainly addressed.

I can't understand why I haven't received PEON if it has been sent to me outside the FAPA mailing. But I understand Charles Lee Riddle's pique, and I hope that some of you will help me correct this error by sending him a dime for a copy of his fanzine. Then if you like it send him a year's subscription. How about backing me up, huh? And how about sending review copies, Charles? I'll make sure you get a good writeup on them.

SPACEWARP: Mar. 50: 9/\$1; Arthur H. Rapp, 2120 Bay St., Saginaw, Mich. This third anniversary issue of SPACEWARP combined with UNIVERSE features a three-color cover illustration by Radell Nelson depicting "Roscoe's Revenge." While followers (if any) of Foo Foo and Ghu Ghu, may object to the scene, loyal Roscoe-ites will revel in it. In line with his policy of more fact and less fiction, this issue is devoted to articles and features. With the contents page sporting such names as Boggs, Watkins, Laney, McConnell DeAngelis, Baldwin, Conner, Kennedy and Rapp it was difficult to choose any one column for review. Boggs' was high on the list with *The Purple Dawn*, in which he traces the development of SPACEWARP through the years, but in my opinion F. Towner Laney takes first place with *Fanzine Scope*. In an article that is caustic at times, contemptuously tolerant at others, Laney ridicules and rips apart one of fandom's more picturesque 'characters' in fine style. Send Art your 15c for a copy, you won't regret it.

SHIVERS: 2nd issue; 10c; Andrew Macura, 230 Prince St., Bridgeport Conn. Lurking among the pages of this mimeographed zine you will find characters and creatures that the publisher says "are purely imaginary—many of them we wouldn't want to know!" This issue contains poetry, features, and an article by H. S. King and W. L. Hudson entitled "Some Shades I've Known". The fact that King and Hudson narrate quite a few incidents to support their view that ghosts and spectres do roam at night, didn't influence me one bit—but I think I'll start double-jacking the doors and windows from now on before I

retire. You have to be careful of burglars, you know.

**FANTASY TIMES:** bi-weekly; 10c; James V. Taurasi, 197-03 32nd Ave., Flushing, N.Y. "The World of Tomorrow Today" is rather appropriate for this up-to-the-minute newszine which brings you news of fan-happenings and current events almost before they occur. Any of you who have tried it know that you can't read all the fanzines, prozines and books that come out; listen to all radio programs and see all the movies concerning sf; or correspond with enough people to know what's going on in science-fiction circles—there just isn't that much time. **FANTASY-TIMES** helps you solve that problem by presenting feature articles on important sf news and columns on books, films, and magazines of note. For example, in Lester Mayer's column "Fantasy Films, Radio and Television" you'll be surprised at the number of sf films in preparation since Hollywood "discovered" science-fiction. At 10c a copy, 12 issues for \$1.00, this fanzine is one you won't want to miss.

**ROCKET NEWS LETTER:** 25c, \$2.25/yr; Wayne Proell, 10630 S. St. Louis Ave., Chicago. Published by the Chicago Rocket Society the Feb. 50 issue looks at rocket travel from a very practical standpoint with articles on "Legal Claims In Space", "VSA-Very Simple Astrogation", "Notes and Communications" and "Rocket Abstracts". Will Chilcote, in "Legal Claims in Space", points out that since a base on the moon would be extremely advantageous from a commercial and or a military standpoint, the first nation to establish such a base will no doubt find its claim disputed by one or more of the other nations. The dissenting nations may present their arguments to the United Nations for a decision or, more probably, follow the widely accepted theory that 'might makes right' and attempt to settle the matter in the same manner disputes have been settled in the past. In the section devoted to reporting on the activities of the Society, George Whittington puts forth some very convincing arguments on why fans should join the rocket societies in their vicinity.

**FANTASIA:** Vol. I, No. 1; Ray C. Higgs, 813 Eastern Ave., Connorsville, Indiana; no price given. A mimeoed zine with articles and stories by Shapiro, Levelle, Dilworth and Higgs. The art work is by Radell Nelson, Ray Higgs, and Bill Rotsler. Much of the material used in *Fantasia* came from the NFFF Manuscript Bureau. This department of NFFF is doing a great job of supplying fanzine editors with needed material and of

placing articles, stories, poems and artwork of fans who want to contribute to zines but have no connections with any specific fanzine.

**AD-O-ZINE:** W. C. Butts, 2058 E. Atlantic St., Philadelphia, 34. A four by six mimeographed adzine which costs you only four cents in stamps. A full page ad in this monthly zine costs only 30c. This is the first issue of *Ad-O-Zine*, and Bill says that for every copy sold he will send one free to some fan in order to build up circulation. We don't know just how long he intends to maintain that policy, but it seems to indicate that he's wholeheartedly behind the job of putting out the zine.

**CATACLYSM:** 10c, 6 for 50c; bi-monthly; Del Close, 1726 Poyntz, Manhattan, Kansas. With the exception of the editorial, this new zine features poetry and limericks exclusively. Published by Del Close and Bob Briney, the first issue has poems by Andrew and Toby Duane, Brian McNaughton, Eugene DeNeese, Perry Delane, Edd Robberts, Hamilton Parker, Del Close and that ever present writer, Anonymous. The editors are issuing a call for material, to be sent to Bob Briney, 561 W. Western Ave, Muskegon, Michigan.

**INCINERATIONS:** 10c; 9101 S. W. Oleson Road, Portland 19, Oregon. We've read this fazine from cover to cover, and have been unable to ascertain the editor's name since neither the editorial nor any of the articles are signed. However, contributions of money or material can be sent to *Incinerations*, at the address listed above. A 6 1/2 by 8 1/2 inch mimeoed zine the widely varied contents of which bear out the editorial renunciation of policy that "no policy is the best insurance against loss of interest" and that *Incinerations* will attempt "to break down the smug bulwarks of propriety." They have, to judge from this first issue, made a definite start in that direction.

**MICHIGAN FANTASITE:** Vol. I, No. 2; Newsbulletin of the Wolverine Insurgents, 510 S. Washington Ave., Saginaw, Mich. Taking the view that fanclubs and fandom are being slowly strangled by red tape and officiousness, the *Wolverine Insurgents* have decided that anarchy is the only way of life, and have set out to prove it. A good example of their system is seen in the Treasurer's Report. I quote: "Treasurer's Report—Not required by the constitution. No constitution. Income... sufficient to cover expenses. No balance. But no deficit. No record-keeping. No headaches. Try it sometime." From where we sit it sounds ideal... if it works. We'll be following future *News Bulletins* from this group to see how the system, or should I say, lack of system, progresses.

**SCIENCE AND SCIENCE-FANTASY FICTION REVIEW:** 15c, 6/75c; C. T. Beck, P. O. Box 877, Grand Central Station, New York 17, N. Y. Published monthly by the Science-Fantasy Society; subscriptions half-price to members. After looking over the fanzine field, this new zine decided that myriad publications already existing had covered the fiction, article and ad-zine situation rather thoroughly. In order to avoid too much duplication, the editor is putting out a zine devoted to newsworthy items on science, science-fiction, fandom and related subjects. Cal is looking for new items, but all contributions must be accompanied by a statement from the author giving his source of information. Send all manuscripts to the above address.

**THE DETROIT STFAN:** Edith Fursick, 5037 Maplewood Ave, Detroit 4, Mich. Official news bulletin of the Detroit Science Fantasy League with a report on the last meeting, information on the next one, and a financial report. Of general interest are the fanzine reviews and the Fanography Department. This issue the Fanography Dept. presents biographical sketches of Art Rapp and George Young. Fans in and around Detroit can write to Edith for information on the DSFL.

**INCUBUS:** Dave Hammond, 806 Oak St., Rummeneide, N. J.; no price listed. This first issue of Incubus gets off to a start with a story, a story-poem, and articles on Science-Fiction movies and the National Amateur Press Association. In Brainstorm, S. L. Lawrence tackles the problem of man's age-old struggle for immortality—or rather, Dr. Brill tackles the problem, and quite successfully. Of course, there's a little matter of body snatching and murder before he succeeds, but these are mere details to the doctor as he nears his goal. The art-work for this story was by Dave Hammond, who not only edits but illustrates the zine.

**CATALYST 4:** Clifton Bennett, 715 Arguello Blvd, San Francisco 18, Calif; no price listed. A sixteen-page, neatly printed offset zine, with mature material. The lead article, "A Salute to the New Education" by James Courzen, presents the pros and cons of progressive education as compared with the days when school "was just a place you hid out in between times, from the truant officer." This issue includes a fable, poems, letters, filler articles and a cartoon depicting the hazards of progressive education, if carried too far. A well-written fanzine, with good presentation of interesting material.

**ORB:** Bi-monthly; 15c, 3/40c, 6/75c;

Bob Johnson, 811 9th St., Greeley, Colorado. "With An Eye On Fandom" Orb No. 3, a combination of multilith, mimeograph and ditto. The cover this issue, a wistful little monster, is by artist Bill Kroll; the cover on the next issue will be by Ralph Rayburn Phillips, stf's ultra-weird artist. There's a wide variety of material, good material, in this zine; fiction, features, poetry, articles, and even a science-fiction Kriss-Kross puzzle. You'll find the familiar names of Rapp, Muir, Bourgea, Ackermann (Henry), Thompson, Charnoff, and Picard on the contents page of this issue, while Hames, English, Bourgea, Picard and Charnoff are already scheduled for the next issue. Good reading here, and well worth the 15c it costs.

**THE OUTLANDER:** 10c; Freddie Hershey, Secretary, 6335 King Avenue, Bell, Calif. Thirty pages of fiction, fact and features for only 10c; that's a bargain anytime. Especially when you have articles like Sneary's "Care and Feeding of Young Fans", look closely, you dyed-in-the-wool fans and admit that it's a pretty accurate picture of the treatment you administered to any unsuspecting neo-fan who fell under your influence. In the same issue Freddie Hershey, having just returned from the Westercon, classifies male fans in various groups in her article "Be Glad Your Man's a Fan." There will undoubtedly be some repercussions from the male contingent, but her comments in the final paragraph may save her from too violent forms of retribution. Len Moffitt tells of the unusual happenings which followed his finding Ben Franklin, hale and hearty, in a cask of wine sent to him by a friend. This is the first part of a serial "Several Out of Time". Add to the above material the work of Woolston, Pederson, Faulkner, Van Couvering and Alan Hershey and you have a top-notch fanzine that's hard to beat where entertainment is concerned.

**GRAVEYARD:** 15c, 12/\$1.50; monthly; Richard Dittmar, 509 W. 183rd St, New York 33, N. Y. First issue of a zine devoted to the weird and horror type of material. The March issue contains Dit's Top Ten, a review of the best ten fanzines in the last ten SAPS mailings, and three stories, by Carlos Ramos, Paul Twanson, and Clark Fist. While the stories this time were short, a 5000 worder by Editor Dittmar entitled "Out of Nowhere" is scheduled for the April Graveyard. The March cover is by Reed Mailer, with interior illustrations by Mailer and Bob Ott.

**MASQUE** combined with **AND FOLLOW SLOWLY:** Bill Rotsler, Route 1, Box 638, Camarillo, Calif. and Sydney



Stibbard, 14909 S. Frailey Ave, Compton, Calif. When Rotsler and Stibbard get together on a fanzine, anything can happen, and usually does. We have here a large collection of good illustrations by both editors. It's worth your while to get the zine just for the pictures alone, but when you add to this articles on any and every subject under the sun by such fans as Sneary, Laney, Fitzgerald, Condra, Cox Rotsler, Stibbard, and—van Vogt and Kuttner! You'll find fact, fiction and fun in the pages of this mammoth zine—it's hectic but hilarious.

You'd think there just couldn't be anything wrong with this fanzine, but there is. The thing that's wrong with it is that you won't be able to get it, in all

probability. It's a FAPazine, published only for circulation among the sixty-five members of the Fantasy Amateur Press Association. But maybe Bill Rotsler has a few extra copies. No harm in asking him if you want to. He asked me to review it, so maybe he wants subscribers.

\* \* \*

PRO-CARD NO. 4; 4/10c; Bob Silverberg, 760 Montgomery St., Brooklyn 13, N.Y.; published weekly. A fanzine mimeographed on a postcard. Bob gets a lot in a small space. It's a novel idea and he's doing all right with it. Reminds me of the photazine that appeared briefly a year or so ago. Wonder what happened to it?

That's all this month.

—ROG PHILLIPS

# THE ULTRA WELFARE STATE



By LESLIE PHELPS



**O**FTEN IN THE evening we'd sit around the Faculty Club after dinner, talking about everything under the Sun. A few of the older members of the faculty tended to be recluses, but every now and then, one of them would enter the conversation.

I remember vividly the night we were talking about Orwell's famous "Nineteen Eighty-Four", thrilling story of the super welfare state wherein human beings were no more than cogs. It is a fanciful piece of science-fiction, but not so far removed from reality that it can't send chills down a man's back.

I had just finished commenting; "Orwell painted a bleak picture," I'd said, "but he could have carried the thing to its ultimate if he'd wanted to. Suppose he'd imagined the final State—sort of a variation on the termite society, where human beings would be designed for a given function?" I made the comment casually, appreciative of the chuckle that followed it.

Frame, in biology, laughed. "That's going too far, Lanner," he said, "That stage will never—"

"—No?" A voice broke in. It was Claridge, an old retired physicist who'd once done some important work in theoretical physics. This was the first time I'd heard him speak. He was one of those recluses I spoke of.

His voice was tense but controlled. As if we weren't there, he went on speaking.

"You're so wrong," he said mockingly. "You don't know. How can you? You were never there!" He mumbled a little and then his speech cleared.

"When I slipped into the time warp and ended up in the Final Society, I found finality! Do you know what they did—what they *do*—fifty thousand years from now? They tailor human beings to their environment, to their job, to their work. They fit a man to his task just as the ants breed warriors and slaves, and breeders—the Final Society is sheer horror."

The words tumbled out of the man and we all sat back, shocked at what appeared to be a senseless outburst. The words didn't make sense until one thought about them for a moment.

Some laughed hesitatingly. "I say," Frink remarked, "aren't you pulling our leg, chap?"

Claridge turned toward him with burning eyes. "I'm not joking," he insisted quietly, "I'm telling you the truth. I've lived in the Final Society. Where Man went from there, I don't know. I don't even care, but I hope he went to Hell!"

"Just what were you in the Final Society, Dr. Claridge?" I asked, deciding to humor the old man's foibles.

"I was a machine-worker," Claridge said simply. He paused. "Here—look!"

We'd known that Claridge had only one arm, and I don't know what we expected to see when he drew back his coat-sleeve. The arm-end was exposed for only a minute and then Claridge stamped angrily off. But that minute was enough. The "hand" at the end of the arm was a metallic claw ideally suited for gripping metal. But that wasn't particularly startling. Apparently it joined the arm directly...

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The same reception was accorded our reprint of Charles-Louis Philippe's *BUBU OF MONTFARNASSE*. Even Nobel Prize Winner T. S. Eliot's Introduction didn't help. For the bookdealer this great work remains nothing more than a chronicle of the lives of men and women who make up the sidewalk traffic of Paris.

When, more recently, we came to the bookdealer with Michael Sadleir's *FORLORN SUNSET* the delicacy had become class-delicacy. This great author's previous work, *Fanny By Gaslight*—which concerned itself with the predominately vicious amusements of the rich—was allowed to be pyramided into best-sellerdom. Because *FORLORN SUNSET* shows with great care the effect of this overwhelming sensualism on the lives of the poor the censorial hands and noses went up again.

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# MATRIARCHY . . .



By CHARLES RECOUR



A THEME in science-fiction which doesn't seem to have been overdone is that of the matriarchy. Recently *Amazing Stories* ran a fine story by Robert Moore Williams which dealt with a matriarchal state of the future in which women ruled the world, suppressed men and in general considered themselves well free of the "slavery" of the past.

In the past there have been a few matriarchies. None were successful in that they endured for very long. But the future may have another story to tell. It is evident even now as we write.

While it is true that equal numbers of men and women are born each year, men do not survive as long as women, and medical science has been showing that in terms of endurance and longevity-hardness, women are stronger than men. Women cannot equal the momentary impulsive energy of men, but they win out in the long run. Why this is, isn't known, but the relative early death of the male shows that the discrepancy is there.

In most countries of the world women actually outnumber men. This is not by a great deal, but in those countries ravaged by war this is definitely true.

In addition, women have become the

economic and social equal of men. Taking all these factors into consideration along with the obvious fact that more and more women are assuming prominent roles in business, government, art and science, it is not inconceivable that at some time in the future, they may become the dominant sex!

The theme is often treated humorously, but its existence is definitely there. Whether this would be good or bad of course is impossible to say, though it appears from the natural order of things that the male is the definite dominant one, and that changing this would not be good.

Most great accomplishments have been made by men. This is true in art, science, government, politics—you name it. Men have been the builders and the creators. This seems in accord with the natural law. Yet there is no guarantee that this might be changed sometime.

Let's hope it doesn't come to that. We still want the little women waiting for us at home, ready with our pipe and slippers. We can't quite see the roles reversed, even if the sociologists suggest that in the not too distant future, Mrs. Joe Blow is going to wield the whip. "I'm sorry dear, don't hit me again. I'll be a good man!"

## THE AMBUSER



By A. T. KEDZIE



CARN SHIVERED a little as a lance of icy wind cut through a rent in his patched and faded quilted cotton uniform. He dug himself closer into the stone lined culvert and ignored the numbing cold. His mind was clear and keen and he had to be near the road to be able to hear the rumble of the tank when it left the City.

We're wearing them down, Carn thought, and an ironic smile crossed his frozen lips. But will we wear down first? The Commy units held the Cities in their iron grip. They had the fuel and the power and the machines plus a ruthlessness that paused at nothing. But the Freelies were making progress too.

Carn thought of the tree vehicles his group had destroyed last week. In his mind's eye he saw the eruption of flame and smoke when the three cars rolled into the field of fire of the few rocket throwers. The Commies didn't know what had hit them.

But the sadness weighed again. Carn remembered the low-flying Commy strafers catching the forty Freelies on the edge of

Marshland and cutting them to ribbons with cannon-fire. But people were escaping the Cities every day and the Freelies were becoming bolder and more audacious with each passing day.

He thought of himself. Armed with thirty pounds of crude dynamite and a simple burning fuse. Radio had picked up a Commy contact. A tankful of technicians was going to leave in four hours for St. George.

You'll end up in hell, Carn's mind said, you'll burn, boys. Oh, if the Freelies could only get one City. Only one! Well that was a long way off. We'll knock you off one by one if it takes us an eternity.

Faintly the sounds of distant vibration traveling far in the quiet cold set Carn alert. He pressed his numbed ear against the underside of the concrete strip. Yes, that was it. The sound of a motor, powerful and assured.

Carn carefully examined his wooden box, wedging it firmly into the crevice in the stone nearest the center of the road. He attached a length of five minute fuse and

then waited. While he waited he checked his single weapon, an old but serviceable bolt action Mauser rifle. The noise grew louder.

Once he crept out of the culvert and stared down the curved stretch of road. The roar of the tank motor was loud and clear now. Carn could visualize the laughing Commies within. Warm and comfortable they were probably enthusiastically planning what they'd requisition in St. George and how the girls were and how their new C.O. would be.

Like hell you will, Carn said half audibly as if the imagined thought was real. He laughed mirthlessly as he realized his anger.

The thump of rubber tread was perfect. Familiarity enabled Carn to calculate by judgment. This was not new. He waited for a hundred pulse beats and struck a match. He applied it to the fuse's end, made sure that the innocent length of cord was ignited. Then he crawled from the culvert and ran as fast as he could through the knifing breeze toward the slight hummock a couple of hundred feet away. He worked the bolt of his rifle and waited for the oncoming Commy vehicle. No Commies were going to get away alive!

The monstrous turtle of steel-alloy rolled smoothly along the snow-covered ribbon of

highway. Inside ten or fifteen men anticipated their new work in one of the captive Cities. The tank rolled over the culvert.

Carn's heart was in his mouth. But it went. There was a cosmic explosion; the mass of metal seemed to rise ten feet in the air, roll over and come to a jumbled stop, a broken smouldering heap of metal.

But some were alive. Carn saw a hatch slowly open and a figure emerge. There was a flame pistol in its hand and it dazedly stared around like some half-blind insect looking for its tormentor. Carn aimed carefully and fired. The figure dropped.

Twice more Commies—those uninjured—tried to emerge. Twice again Carn cut them down. Carn waited expecting more to come out. But they didn't. Slowly he made his way toward the wreckage. As soon as he was sure there was no life there, he'd leave, for there would be swift patrols out seeking vengeance.

Ten minutes later he'd completed his distasteful task even when sparked by hatred. This was one more thing the Commies would extract revenge for, but there would be no end to it. It would continue until the last of them surrendered or died and left the Cities to the Freelines.

Carn walked off briskly into the cold night. The wind seemed a little softer and the stars were shining brighter...

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## GENETIC HERITAGE



By J. R. MARKS



SO FAR AS we can ascertain, the vic-  
tims of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki  
atomic bomb blasts, have not had their  
gene and chromosome chains altered. At  
least we are assured of this fact by the  
authorities, both Japanese and American.

But when one reads the reports of the  
biophysical laboratories, one is constrained  
to wonder. How true are these reports?

The effects of radiation on plants and  
animals are clearly shown by innumerable  
experiments. And they all seem to be bad.  
Why then, aren't humans affected in the  
same way? We think that the answer is—  
they are, but...

For example it has been found that rats  
exposed to the violent and virulent attacks  
of gamma radiation from x-ray and radio-  
actives, exhibit some extraordinary freak-  
ish reactions. When pregnant mice are ir-  
radiated with these rays, the offspring  
turn into incredibly freakish monsters.  
Thus, rats are born who die because their  
mouths are so deformed they can not re-  
lease the air they take in while nursing  
and so literally blow up. Other turn out  
with defective skins, with forked tails,  
legs fused together.

Scientists warn that radiation is dan-  
gerous, yet we never hear about the re-  
sults of the greatest radiation experiment  
of all—Hiroshima. It seems to us that it  
would be a favor to the public to release  
such information. An ill-informed people  
are not a well-adjusted people.

These monstrous and freakish off-spring  
produced in the laboratory are not as re-  
mote from humans as one might think.  
The mechanism of reproduction and birth  
in both animals and humans is essentially  
the same. Can we not believe then that  
the radiation effects are the same? Sci-  
entists on one hand tell us of the dangers  
of radiation—and on the other, evade their  
existence. Why? Why?

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# FACTS OF THE FUTURE

By LYNN STANDISH

## THE URANIUM HERITAGE

PROFESSOR of Physics Dodson glanced briefly at his watch and then looked up again at the class he was addressing.

"I have," he said authoritatively, in his well-modulated voice, "enough time to consider quickly, how through radioactivity we are able to discuss the age of the Earth. It is very simple, really."

The freshman chemistry class stirred uneasily, anxious to disperse, anxious to get away from the dry and dusty talk of the classroom. Anxious to get into the fresh air away from the acrid smell of chemicals.

"All we do," Dodson went on, "is to pick a sample of rock containing uranium and lead. Knowing the lead is an end-product of radioactive disintegration of the uranium, by measuring the relative quantities of the two, and by considering that the half life of uranium is about a billion years, we can easily deduce that the Earth must be about—at least—twice as old as that, or around two billion years."

"Professor," a voice in the back interrupted, "Yes?" Dodson acknowledged, "What is your question?"

"Where did the radioactive uranium come from originally—way back when?"

Dodson smiled: "I'm afraid that's one I can't answer," he replied. "Class dismissed!"

As he walked from the podium in the lecture room, the persistent thought annoyed him. Where did that damned uranium come from, anyway?... What was the source?... Originally it must have been the sun-stuff from which the Earth was born... Or was it?...

He left the question flicking at the corners of his mind...

"...does not the thought overwhelm you, Kor?" the alien intelligence radiated to his companion. "Do you realize that in six—" here an inconceivable unit of time—"we shall destroy the third planet?"

Coldly the answer came back. "I think you are weakening, Zeen; why should we not eliminate the poison at its source. This civilization is too powerful and will overcome the Galaxy. We shall destroy it with the planet-wreckers. Is that not good sense?"

"You are right," the other agreed. "But I must admit it saddens me to think this flowering civilization must so soon perish in the atomic radiations."

"Feel no regret. You know what they've

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etc. are a prolific source of material for the chemical industry itself. Soon, like the pig in the packing house, wood will be used down to the last leaf. And that'll probably end up as some sort of a covering for milady!

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### THE ALIEN DETECTOR

"CURT," BRAINARD, commander of the Base Entry Port said, fingering his cigar, "you've got to stop them. They're filtering through and we suspect that more than one man in our own system, right here, is one of them."

The younger man looked at him quizzically. "But how?" he asked. "I'm only in charge of testing. What is their structure? Who are they? How do they manage to break through?"

Impatiently Brainard brushed away Curt's questions. "We don't really know a damned thing. But sabotage and accidents have been happening at too high a rate. It's gotten to be almost a pattern and we can't seem to pin it down. Everybody you've checked has proven to be human within ten decimals. But you've still got to figure out a system." He sucked on the cigar, indicating dismissal. As Curt arose to go, he let go a parting shot. "...and they may be extra-Galactic, remember."

Curt Jensen left for his own offices. At this space port on Pluto, all ships coming into the System checked their cargoes and crews. This was to prevent alien dangers from coming into the inner planets.

He'd known of course for months that the higher-ups were disturbed and Brainard's admission was no real surprise.

Curt spent the remainder of the work-period following up carefully all suspicious entries but of the hundreds who came through none were alien. For the next day he arranged tests for personnel.

The test went off with a bang. Fast and sure they showed nothing suspicious. All members of the examining group were human to the ultimate classification.

"Phil," Curt said to his chief assistant, "we're going to run through the executives too. That means we take the tests as well."

The competent assistant. "Right Curt," he said. "You can't tell. We'll give everybody the once-over heavily."

But again the efforts proved futile. All personnel from officers down proved normal and human to the limiting ranges. Phil and Curt took their tests, physical and psychological, with the rest. No results.

Curt sat at his desk and thumbed through the sheafs of reports. There seemed to be no pattern; it looked as if the sheets covered perfectly random groups as you would expect. Oh-oh, even as he thought it, Curt noticed one little peculiarity—not one that stood out either. In a few minutes he had sorted out the suspicious papers.

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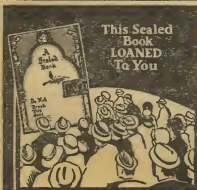
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They had one thing in common—and only one thing.

Not one of the examinees had taken the x-ray test! And most used the excuse—certified—"radiation prone—will not permit x-ray check—on medical orders."

Curt glanced through the list of names and his eyebrows rose when he saw some of them...Crane in Research, Ellory in Metals, clerks...and then...Phillip Stern! His own assistant.

Still there was no proof. But that would easily be arranged.

Curt made his preparations...

"Say, Phil," he asked innocently, "come over to the labs with me, will you?"

"O.K." Phil agreed readily.

They went into the Labs and Curt on one pretext had Phil wait in an office. But on the other side of the wall was an x-ray machine faced on the opposite side by a fluoroscopic wall. Anxiously Curt waited. The machine whined softly and shadowy pictures appeared on the wall. Phil's outline also came on. But Curt stood back, his face aghast. Phil—if that was its name—had no skeleton!

Curt, his face ashen, knew now what he faced. This alien had usurped the human form, he and his kind, so perfectly that detection under anything except x-ray was impossible. Anttreans had structures of body-forms like that.

Gripping a flame-pistol, Curt walked into the room and faced the unsuspecting Phil.

"What happened, Phil?" he asked quietly, but every fibre of his person taut, "what happened to your bones?"

The thing called Phil arose. The face changed from calm repose into glaring hate, knowing that its secret had been uncovered. Simultaneously its hand shot for a weapon, but Curt was faster. A brush of fire lanced from the flame pistol, and as the creature's nervous structure disintegrated, the protoplasmic mass it held into human resemblance, disintegrated also. A large glob of protoplasmic liquid slithered to the floor. Curt spat at the mess and walked rapidly toward Brainard's headquarters. The aliens had been caught...

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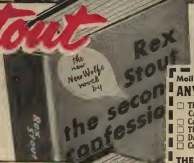


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